

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

NOVEMBER 1996

## THE INCIDENT AT TWISTED TREE

by DAVID K. HARFORD

**PLUS**

Gripping Suspense  
from  
**LOREN D.  
ESTLEMAN**  
and more!

\$2.95 U.S./\$3.75 CAN.

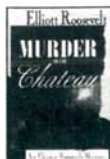


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

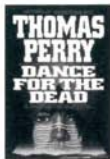
WILL WILSON



0802\* \$25.95/\$12.98



3624 \$19.95/\$9.98



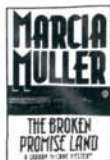
2881 \$23.00/\$11.98



3426 \$24.00/\$12.98

# Mysteries to Die for

TAKE 6 BOOKS FOR 99¢  
with membership in *Mystery Guild!*



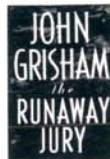
3673 \$22.95/\$10.98



1198 \$21.00/\$10.98



3509 \$23.95/\$12.98



1644 \$26.95/\$12.98

## HERE'S WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU JOIN...

**A GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION.** Once your membership's accepted, we'll send you 6 BOOKS and FREE CLUB TOTE. If you're dissatisfied with the books, return them within 10 days *at our expense*. Membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The Tote is yours to keep.

**HUGE DISCOUNTS ON HARDCOVER BOOKS.** Save as much as *60% off* publishers' edition prices. Club books are sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.

**THE FREE CLUB MAGAZINE.** You'll receive up to 17 issues a year, plus up to 2 special issues with great selections and savings. Each reviews the Featured Book Selections plus dozens of alternate books.

**SHOPPING MADE SIMPLE.** To get the Featured Book Selections, *do nothing*—they will be sent automatically. If you prefer another book—or none at all—return your Member

Reply Form by the specified date. A shipping and handling charge (and sales tax, where applicable) is added to each order.

**AN EASY-TO-MEET OBLIGATION.** Take up to 2 years to buy 4 more books at regular low Club prices. Afterwards, you may resign membership any time.

**RISK-FREE RETURN PRIVILEGES.** If you get an unwanted book because your Club magazine was delayed and you had less than 10 days to respond, return the book *at our expense*.

\* Explicit scenes and/or language

Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.

Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.



**FREE TOTE**  
with membership



3517 \$21.00/\$10.98



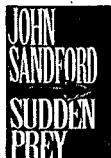
3384 \$21.95/\$11.98



3392\* \$23.95/\$12.98



3566\* \$23.00/\$10.98



3608 \$23.95/\$10.98



0844 \$22.95/\$11.98



0448 \$21.95/\$10.98



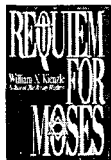
3533 \$22.95/\$11.98



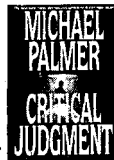
1388 \$22.95/\$10.98



0455 \$21.95/\$10.98



0570 \$19.95/\$9.98



0125 \$22.95/\$10.98



3145 \$22.00/\$9.98



3434 \$22.95/\$10.98



1735 \$19.95/\$9.98



2980 \$23.95/\$10.98



3590 \$21.00/\$9.98



2188 \$22.00/\$9.98



3582 \$21.95/\$10.98



2675\* \$24.00/\$12.98



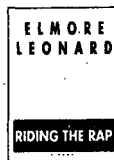
0711 \$22.95/\$9.98



1180\* \$23.95/\$12.98



3640 \$22.95/\$12.98



0653\* \$22.95/\$9.98

# MYSTERY

## GUILD

MAIL TO: Mystery Guild  
6550 East 30th Street  
P.O. Box 6362  
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

**YES!** Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated. Plus, send my Free Club Tote. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling.

**SAVE EVEN MORE!** Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 more books. Bill me an added \$3.99, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

7	8	0	7	3
				321

Please write book numbers here:


33

Mr./Mrs.

Miss/Ms.

(please print)

Address

Apt.

City

State

ZIP

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

AH 11/96

# CONTENTS



## SHORT STORIES

<b>ZIPI MART EDDIE</b> by Janet Nodar	<b>6</b>
<b> SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE MIKADO MASSAGE</b> by Loren D. Estleman	<b>22</b>
<b> YOU CAN'T REALLY BLAME THEM</b> by Steve Ritchie	<b>32</b>
<b> THAT MIDNIGHT TRAIN</b> by Raymond Steiber	<b>40</b>
<b> LIN PO AND THE DEADWALKER</b> by B. H. Schrier	<b>56</b>
<b> THE INCIDENT AT TWISTED TREE</b> by David K. Harford	<b>64</b>
<b> YOUR LIFE</b> by Linda Mannheim	<b>101</b>
<b> HALLOWEEN TURKEY</b> by Sharon Mackey	<b>112</b>
<b> OUR CLOSING HYMN</b> by Pamela Blackwood	<b>126</b>

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

<b>THE HOUSE</b> by André Maurois	<b>153</b>
-----------------------------------	------------

## DEPARTMENTS

<b>EDITOR'S NOTES</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>UNSOLVED</b> by Robert Kesling	<b>99</b>
<b>SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED"</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>BOOKED &amp; PRINTED</b> by Mary Cannon	<b>156</b>
<b>THE STORY THAT WON</b>	<b>157</b>

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 41, No. 11, November, 1996. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$43.45 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1996 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

ISSN:0002-5224.

Printed in U.S.A.

Cover by Will Williams

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED





## Nine 60-minute audio cassettes for only... \$9.60! (a \$53.91 value!)

RADIO SPIRITS is on a mission to introduce thousands of new people to the joys of "old-time radio" programming. So, for a limited time, we're offering these 30-minute programs for the UNBELIEVABLE price of only 53 cents each! Nine hours of classic radio entertainment for only \$9.60 plus \$6.00 shipping and handling. You'll enjoy these terrific mystery radio shows over and over again!

Here's what you'll get...

### **Tape #1 - Suspense, three classic tales to keep you in Suspense!**

Side A & B) "On A Country Road" Starring Cary Grant 11-16-50 / "Zero Hour" Starring Evelan Rudy 5-18-58 / "Three Skeleton Key" Starring Vincent Price 11-11-56 (60 min.)

### **Tape #2 - Inner Sanctum, with Raymond, your host!**

Side A) "The Girl and the Gallows" 5-1-45 (30 min.)  
Side B) "Dead to Rights" 5-22-45 (30 min.)

### **Tape #3 - Escape**

Side A) "Leinngengen Versus the Ants" Starring Tudor Owen 8-4-49 (30 min.)  
Side B) "Blood Bath" Starring Vincent Price 6-30-50 (30 min.)

### **Tape #4 - Lights Out! Hosted by Arch Oboler**

Side A) "Murder Castle" Starring Joseph Kearns 8-3-43 (30 min.)  
Side B) "Special to Hollywood" Starring Howard Duff 1944 (30 min.)

### **Tape #5 - The Mysterious Traveler, starring Maurice Tarplin**

Side A) "The Good Die Young" 2-27-44 (30 min.)  
Side B) "House of Death" 1-30-44 (30 min.)

### **Tape #6 - Mystery in the Air, starring Peter Lorre**

Side A) "The Black Cat" 9-18-47 (30 min.)  
Side B) "The Lodger" 8-14-47 (30 min.)

### **Tape #7 - Murder by Experts**

Side A) "Dig Your Own Grave" 8-15-49 (30 min.)  
Side B) "Return Trip" 9-5-45 (30 min.)

### **Tape #8 - The Whistler**

Side A) "The Thin Line" 1-7-46 (30 min.)  
Side B) "Black Book" 4-28-47 (30 min.)

### **Tape #9 - The Lux Radio Theatre**

Side A & B) "Sorry, Wrong Number" Starring Barbara Stanwyck and Burt Lancaster 1-9-45 (60 min.)

Here's how to order...

Call Toll-Free (Visa or Mastercard) **1-800-RADIO-48**  
(1-800-723-4648) and mention code **GMH7**

...or send in this ad with a check or money order for \$9.60 plus \$6.00 shipping & handling payable to:

RADIO SPIRITS, c/o **MYSTERIES**, Box 2141, Schiller Park, IL 60176-2141

\*Illinois residents please add 74 cents sales tax. Allow 14 days for delivery.

\*RADIO SPIRITS has three more 9-cassette collections available for only \$9.60 plus \$6.00 shipping & handling. They are: **DETECTIVES, SCIENCE FICTION and WESTERNS!**

**ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED**

# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**A**gain looms Halloween, and in acknowledgment some creepy goings-on lurk within this issue. And then there's the story of the pumpkin thief. . . .

Four stories herein are told by authors new to us.

Janet Nodar ("ZipiMart Eddie") and Pamela Blackwood ("Our Closing Hymn") are both Southerners, hailing respectively from Mobile, Alabama, and Greensboro, North Carolina; both stories are first fiction publications for them. Ms. Nodar writes food articles for her local paper, teaches an adult education class, and looks after two small children. Ms. Blackwood, who has worked at various jobs including, in colonial dress, guiding visitors through a three-room log cabin rebuilt be-

hind the city museum, has a particular interest in Edgar Allan Poe, a visit to whose grave in Baltimore inspired her to serious writing efforts. "My husband and I celebrate [Poe's] birthday every January nineteenth with a couple of glasses of wine and, on occasion, a black birthday cake."

Linda Mannheim ("Your Life") and B. H. Schrier ("Lin Po and the Deadwalker") both come from New York (the city and the state respectively) and have both authored other short stories. Ms. Mannheim, a freelance editor, grew up in Washington Heights, the neighborhood of her story, studied in England, France, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, lived in New England, and has recently

*(continued on page 55)*

---

**CATHELEEN JORDAN, Editor**

**SUSAN A. TEITZ, Senior Assistant Editor**

**TERRI CZECHKO, Art Director**

**ANTHONY BARI, Junior Designer**

**CAROLE DIXON, Production Manager**

**CYNTHIA MANSON, VP, Marketing and Subsidiary Rights**

**GEORGE SCHUMACHER, Manager, Contracts and Permissions**

**KATHLEEN HALLIGAN, Subsidiary Rights and Marketing Coordinator**

**JOE GALLAGHER, Director of Newsstand Sales**

**SANDY MARLOWE, Circulation Services**

**JUDY DORMAN, Advertising Sales Manager. Advertising Offices, New York:**

**(212) 698-1196. Advertising Representative: Dresner Direct, Inc.,**

**New York, New York (212) 889-1078.**

**PETER KANTER, Publisher**

**FRAN DANON, Editorial Director**

# Amazing new insoles custom-cushion your foot in liquid comfort!

*Gel-Soles™, unique gel cushions, massage feet as you walk—helping to alleviate foot and lower-body pain!*

The special non-toxic gel self-adjusts to cushion changing pressure points and absorb shock



Gel-Soles conform perfectly to your foot and support your arch

## Walking doesn't have to hurt!

**Gel-Soles help provide relief for:**

- Pain associated with heel-spurs
- Arthritis pain in your knees, hips, lower back or ankles
- Foot pad atrophy
- Being on your feet all day

**D**o you spend a lot of time on your feet? Do you suffer from foot, lower back, hip, knee or ankle pain? It shouldn't hurt to walk! Amazing new insoles—Gel-Soles™—can help.

**Walk with comfort.** Accepted by the American Podiatric Medical Association, Gel-Soles gently cushion your feet on a layer of non-toxic gel, conforming perfectly to your foot and supporting your arch. The gel self-adjusts to cushion changing pressure points and absorb shock while you walk to help alleviate foot and lower body pain from heel-spurs, arthritis and more.

Gel-Soles make walking more comfortable for the elderly or anyone who's on their feet all day. They are removable, washable and transferable to any shoe. An odor-resistant, breathable urethane shell lessens foot perspiration and acts as an insulator—you'll walk cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter!

**Risk-free.** Gel-Soles are backed by our risk-free home trial and a one-year manufacturer's warranty. If you're not fully satisfied, return them within 90 days for a full "No Questions Asked" refund. Most orders processed in 72 hours and shipped UPS. Mention shoe size when ordering.

**Gel-Soles™** ..... \$19.95 \$4 S&H

Mention promotional code 1141-MG-1538.

For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

## 800-992-2966



To order by mail, send check or money order for total amount including S&H (VA residents add 4.5% sales tax). To charge it, enclose account number and exp. date.

**COMTRAD INDUSTRIES**

2820 Waterford Lake Dr., Suite 106 Midlothian, VA 23113

FICTION

# ZipiMart Eddie

## Janet Nodar



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



---

---

**K**ristal pulled up the T-shirt she'd been sleeping in, put on a bra that she didn't really need, and stepped into some jeans. All of her uniforms were filthy; she'd had no time for doing laundry. She washed her face and scraped her dark blonde hair into a ponytail. There were purple circles under her pale blue eyes. Except for the fine webbing at her eyes and mouth, she looked like an underfed twelve-year-old. She buckled her shoulder holster and slid in her .357. Over that she put on a brown fleece-lined windbreaker. The gun made a lump under it. She stuck her badge in a pocket.

It was not yet dawn, and the birds were racketing in the trees. The water was running fast in swollen Moss Creek, fifty yards behind her trailer. The air felt cool and clean; it wasn't humid yet. Oak pollen had turned her little orange Ford a sickly green. Her tires crunched on the oyster-shell drive that led past her parents' brick ranchhouse and their pecan orchard, branches still spidery from winter.

She was at the ZipiMart on Highway 47 in minutes. One of Bitter Tree's three patrol cars was parked out front. Next door was the Church of God's Rock, recently converted from a Sprouse-Reitz: THE WEATHER

NEVER CHANG S IN HELL! SERVICES AT 8 AND 11.

Inside the ZipiMart, Big Leroy lounged against the linoleum counter, his black hands dwarfing his Styrofoam cup of coffee. He wore a blinding yellow and blue track suit. He was yawning. He'd been up late, as had Kristal, helping the sheriff's department scrape up a three-car accident a few miles north.

On the other side of the counter slouched the cashier, a skinny, milk-faced boy with a few dark freckles and a mop of coarse, curly brown hair. He wore ripped jeans and a black T-shirt emblazoned with a skeleton. His mouth was finely shaped and delicately pink. Kristal nodded at him and at Big Leroy and poured herself some coffee.

"This is Eddie Fandeaux, Kristal," Big Leroy said. "Eddie, this is Officer Gibson. Let's go over your story again." His voice and manner were mild, but Kristal could tell he thought something wasn't right. Suddenly awake and interested, she set her coffee next to his and unwrapped a discouraged-looking Honey Bun. Big Leroy made a minor face. He hated Kristal's eating habits.

"It happened about five. Nobody had been in for maybe an hour. I was reading the paper. I look up, and here's this skinny

black guy. He had a mean expression." Eddie frowned and shook his head. His eyes flicked away from Big Leroy as if he were afraid Big would be offended at the mention of race. Eddie's eyes were a brownish hazel. Something stirred in Kristal's memory. Could she know this kid?

"He says, 'Gimme your money.' He's got his hand in his pocket like he's got a gun. I gave him the money. I ain't getting kilt for this crummy job."

"So you never actually saw a gun?" Big said.

"No."

"How much did he get?"

"A hundred sixteen dollars and forty-three cents. All that was in the register."

"He take anything else?"

"Uh, no," Eddie said, but his eyes wandered towards the beer coolers.

"There's no video," Big Leroy said. "The security camera isn't working." He met Kristal's eyes; it was this, plus something unnatural in Eddie's storytelling, that was bothering him. "Lucky for the bad guy."

"I told my boss," Eddie said. "You can check. I told Mr. Grant two weeks ago. He's too cheap to get it fixed. He don't care if we get shot in here."

"What was the guy wearing?" Kristal asked.

"Jeans. A white T-shirt."

"What kind of car was he driving?" Big asked.

"Car?"

Big Leroy pointed out toward the road. "You know," he said. "The things with wheels. Vroom vroom."

"I don't know," Eddie said. "I didn't see a car."

"How'd you get to work? Where's your own car, Eddie?"

"Mine? My mom brought me. Mine ain't working."

"You aren't jerking us around a little bit here, are you, Eddie?" Kristal asked.

"Did you need a little extra money for the weekend?" Big Leroy asked.

"What are you saying? Hey, I didn't take the money! I didn't. I don't ever take things. You can ask anybody." Indignation put color in Eddie's face and brought his eyes to life. "I wouldn't do something so stupid."

"Well, something ain't right, son," Big Leroy said.

"I ain't your son," Eddie said. Big stared at him, put down his coffee cup, and walked outside. They could see him through the window looking up at the changing sky. Big never lost his temper, but sometimes he had to take a stroll.

"That was uncalled for," Kristal said. "And stupid."

"He wants to lock me up."

"Neither of us thinks you're telling the truth."

"Well, I am. You can't prove nothing else."

"Today's your day to learn a lesson, little Eddie," Kristal said. Jerks like Eddie who thought common sense couldn't harm them irritated her. They all watched too much television. "Lock up the store. We're going to go see the nice police station."

Eddie obediently hung up the CLOSED sign. Outside, Big had Eddie empty his pockets; no one hundred sixteen dollars and forty-three cents. He had four dollars in his wallet. Big cuffed him, put him in the back of the unit, and drove to the Bitter Tree police station, a block off Main Street. Kristal followed them.

The station was a Gulf Coast cottage with a sagging front porch and a clumsy cinder block addition behind it that housed the jail. It sat in the shadow of a water oak that had been a century old when Kristal's mother was born. The oak's shaggy branches roofed half a block, and its roots had pushed up the street, the sidewalk, and the driveway. Bitter Tree, perched on a wedge of dry land between Moss Creek, the Horse River, and Cat Bait Bayou, was a jumble of oaks, wooden houses, and small stores and cafes. Main Street ran through its center like a spine, coming to an abrupt halt at the old Griggs Boatyard wharf.

Big Leroy unlocked the station's front door. "Estelle," he called. "It's us."

"Arrright." Estelle Patterson was the night dispatcher. She was hidden from view, back in the former breakfast room that now served as the dispatch center.

Big uncuffed Eddie and said, "Go sit in that green chair." Eddie slouched away.

When he was out of earshot, Kristal said, "It was him or some friend of his."

"He apologized to me in the car," Big Leroy said. "Did it like a little man, too?"

"No kidding?" Kristal was surprised. "I guess he's got a lick of common sense after all. I'll get him, since you wrote up the wreck last night." They were shorthanded. The new chief, Bowman, had fired two officers and driven a third to resign. The remaining force consisted of Big Leroy, Kristal, Mike Thompson at home recuperating from back surgery, pudgy Duff Johnson, and Wally Berber, fresh out of the academy. He was in Montgomery to learn high-speed driving techniques, a class all the males were very interested in taking. They also had Tomeka Paris, the new day dispatcher and secretary; Estelle, night dispatcher and city councilperson; and Artie the jailer, who could be persuaded to man dispatch if

absolutely no one else was available. Estelle, a retired schoolteacher, had volunteered to direct traffic at the elementary school crosswalk while Mike was out.

"All right," Big Leroy said. "I'm gonna go home and wrap myself around some bacon and eggs."

Eddie sat in the miserable green chair next to Kristal's desk. She was starving. She hammered out her report as fast as she could, not that she ever took a lot of trouble with them. Kristal was a terrible typist. She did not believe in correcting her mistakes; she simply x'd them over and started the word again. Big Leroy usually did their typing.

"You sure this is what happened, Eddie?" she asked again, almost finished. "You're ready to sign this?"

"Of course," Eddie said.

"You'd have no problem with taking a lie detector test?"

His eyes widened, but he said, "Fine."

"You know what perjury is, don't you? That's lying to the court. This'll all seem a lot more serious when you're talking in front of a judge. You're eighteen; you could go to jail. You still have a chance to straighten things out now, Eddie, if you tell me the truth."

"I ain't lying." His eyes shift-

ed. Kristal snorted. A better liar would have gazed intently into her bloodshot baby blues.

Eddie sighed; he was wearing out. He suddenly looked very young to her. His pale skin was greenish under the station's pitiless fluorescent lights. They hung suspended from the acoustical tile that hid the cottage's twelve foot ceilings with their graceful plaster moldings and their waterstains.

"I don't know what to do with you, Mr. Ed," Kristal said. "I'd like to send you home to your mama, but I just can't get myself to believe you."

"Don't you need some evidence or something?"

"Later. I can store you for a little while just because I find you suspicious."

"Do what you have to do. I ain't done nothing wrong."

There was something in his voice, maybe just a lack of sullenness or self-pity, that caught at Kristal's ear and puzzled her. "Why are you doing this, Eddie? Did somebody threaten you?"

"No, no." His eyes met hers. The truth hung between them for a second. They both knew he was lying; in that look, he admitted it, and apologized. She almost thought he was going to tell his secret, but he caught himself and looked away, breaking the moment. She sighed. Stupid kid.



"You're a stand-up guy, Eddie," she said. "I'm proud of you. And your mom will be proud of you, too." He'd told her that he lived with his mother at Rooney's River Camp.

"Oh, you bet," he said. "I can't wait to tell her."

Kristal laughed. He gave her an up-from-under, wiseguy look, pleased that he'd amused her.

"Whoever you're lying for is going to think you're a sucker," she said, "and everyone else is just going to think you're a liar."

"If you're gonna lock me up, do it, or else let me go home and go to sleep. I been up since yesterday morning," Eddie said evenly.

"Well, you are tough," Kristal said. She pressed the jail buzzer. Artie buzzed back. In a minute his tread jarred the warped floor. The jailer was a tall, gaunt man with a ruffle of gray hair around his skull. He collected Eddie. Kristal yawned and stretched and followed them. Estelle Patterson was napping on the lumpy couch beside the dispatch station. She wore a pink knit pantsuit decorated with sequins and glitter paint. She snored gently, lying on her back, hands folded over her round stomach and her helmet of gray hair scrooched forward over her brow. The radio crackled once; her eyes opened and shut.

Eddie still had the four dollars in his wallet along with his driver's license, a laminated copy of "The Serenity Prayer," and some dog-eared photographs. "Can I look at your pictures, Eddie?" Kristal asked. Eddie shrugged. She leafed through them. Pimplly Eddie in a school photograph. A smiling older woman with a broad face, her hair up and a fat corsage sitting on her collarbone. Baby Eddie in the arms of a skinny young man with a crewcut and a crooked grin.

Eddie picked up the phone and told his mother where he was; their conversation was abrupt and monosyllabic, at least on Eddie's side. Before Kristal left, he was asleep in one of the three small cells.

Kristal walked to the Main Street Diner. The sun was up, and the air was humid now, sticky, but nothing like the clot-ted atmosphere of summer. The diner smelled like hot grease and sugar; Leola had been making doughnuts. Kristal ate two along with eggs, bacon, and grits. It was not a lack of appetite that kept her thin. She drank three cups of coffee, too, the last with her dad, who came to the diner every morning to see his friends.

Breakfast gave Kristal a second wind. She walked briskly back to the station to fetch her

car. A breeze moved in the trees making the Spanish moss dance. She sneaked around the building to where her car was parked, not wanting Chief Bowman to see her. He was already in; his red pickup was parked in the street. Technically, her next shift didn't start till four, but if he saw her, he'd drag her in to work. She thought she'd go by Rooney's River Camp and talk to Eddie's mother, but then she was going to get some sleep.

The camp was two or three miles west of Bitter Tree. She passed the sign, U-turned, and went back. A narrow red dirt driveway led to nine or ten battered cabins. The wide river flowed past only a few yards away. There was a crumbling cement boat launch and, nearby, a small boat pulled up on the grass with its motor hiked up in back and its nose in an azalea bush. She wondered how long this dingy little place would last. A year or two and it would be transformed into another overpriced subdivision full of people who commuted to Mobile every day and couldn't tell a mullet from a catfish.

Cabin Number Five faced the river. A purple Pontiac and an elderly, well-waxed white Honda, the car Eddie had said wasn't running, were parked out front. By the steps a dogwood in

full flower glowed like a sudden shaft of light.

Kristal knocked, and the unlatched front door swung open. Pine-scented cleaner smarted in her nose like smelling salts. She called hello. The box of a living room was crowded with a TV, a dingy vinyl loveseat, and a coffee table made of wood-grained plastic. A tiny hall led to a kitchen where a heavy woman was scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees. She rose awkwardly to her feet and came forward, shutting the narrow hall door behind her. She waved her hand in the air as if to dissipate the smell and stepped into the front door's frame. Kristal went down a step to give her room.

"Mrs. Fandeaux?" Kristal asked. "Tracy Fandeaux? I'm Officer Kristal Gibson. I'm here about Eddie."

"I know why you're here. My boy called me. I know all about it." Tracy Fandeaux was taller than Kristal and made three of her in bulk. Her stained T-shirt was drawn tightly over her big arms and stomach. She was the woman in Eddie's picture, ten years older, no corsage. Her thin gray hair was held off her wide face with bobby pins. The effect was practical rather than attractive.

"My boy didn't do nothing wrong." Eddie's mother was angry; this was a punitive house-

cleaning. "He's never been in trouble. I've always taken care of Eddie. He's my responsibility. He's my pride and joy. I've tried to raise him right. There's no telling what can happen to a kid."

"Where's Mr. Fandeaux?"

"You tell me, missy. I ain't seen that sucker since 1987. He was Eddie's stepdaddy anyhow."

"Mrs. Fandeaux, I don't necessarily think Eddie robbed the store, but I think he has guilty knowledge about this crime. I believe he's lying to us. Who are his friends? I know you wouldn't want his friends to get him into trouble."

"It's been fifteen years since we last lived here. We just moved back to this dump from Montgomery. I don't know if Eddie's even met anybody. Somebody comes in and robs that damn store, and you blame my boy. He's no bum, he's a worker, a good boy. It's lucky he wasn't killed. He's never been in trouble a day in his life. So many bad kids in this world . . ."

"I think he's covering up for somebody," Kristal interrupted, since Mrs. Fandeaux showed no signs of stopping on her own. "You don't know anybody in Bitter Tree? Why'd you move here, then?" Bitter Tree was not exactly a resort area.

"Well, he does have some cousins. Creel and Georgie Rollins."

"Bingo," Kristal said.

"Oh," Tracy said. "You know them?"

"They're regular customers down at the police station."

"They was probably out on a shrimp boat last night, though," Tracy said. "They do that kind of work. Hey, aren't you Leifert and Jonelle Gibson's girl? I believe you used to babysit for me a long time ago. You were in junior high. Eddie was only three or four."

"Really?" Kristal said. "You know, I thought he seemed familiar somehow."

"I used to work at Gulf Seafood Packers before seafood went so high and they closed. When we was here, we went to the Church of Christ, too. Tell your mother and your sisters hello for me."

"I will." Suddenly Kristal had to swallow a yawn.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"No, ma'am, I'm sorry. I don't. I babysat for a lot of people."

"I always thought you were such a sulky little thing. Moody. Not like your sisters. And now here you are, putting Eddie in jail."

"I had a permanent case of PMS back then," Kristal said. She'd been an unhappy teenager. So what? It was a pain, living in a place where everyone had known her since the day she

was born. And where everyone knew her sisters, too: remarkable Royberta and harebrained, beautiful Roxy.

"I've got one now," Tracy said. "You don't want to know."

Kristal yawned. She couldn't stop herself. The need to sleep was overtaking her. "I've got to go, Mrs. Fandeaux."

"What about Eddie? I ain't got money for no bail. Is he gonna have to stay in jail?"

"I don't know. He'll have to tell us what really happened." If he refused to talk, they wouldn't be able to hold him unless they found the stolen money or some other evidence, but Kristal didn't see any reason to tell Tracy Fandeaux that. "Call me if you think of anything useful," she said. "I know you don't want your boy to be in trouble."

"I'm gonna get him a lawyer," Tracy said. "You can't keep him down there."

Kristal shrugged. "We'll see."

The drive home took forever. Kristal called the station, left a message about looking up Eddie's cousins, those bad Rollins boys, and stumbled to bed, shedding clothes.

**"K**rissey! Kristal Darlene!" The urgency in her mother's voice penetrated Kristal's sleep like a knife through water.

"What? What is it?"

Her mother's thin face loomed over her. Her long red and gray hair was knotted in her usual bun. "Tomeka called the house. They've been trying to get you—you slept through the ringing. There's been an accident on the river. Three children thrown from a boat."

Kristal was already dressing. "Is Search and Rescue there yet?" It was ten o'clock; she'd had one and a half hours of sleep.

"I don't know the details, Krissey. I just know you're to go to the Main Street wharf."

At the wharf the children's mother sat in the front seat of a county ambulance, wrapped in a blanket. Estelle Patterson was marching up and down the warped planking. She pushed Kristal into the borrowed boat Big Leroy held steady at the river's edge. The children's father, Chief Bowman; and Search and Rescue volunteers, most of whom worked at the boatyards along the river, were already on the water. The marine police were on the way.

The vacationing family had been staying in a borrowed cabin on the river, using the cabin's motorboat. They'd been heading south that morning, to the Mississippi Sound and the Gulf of Mexico. Not used to the vagaries of the river, the father had been



going too fast, hit a submerged cypress stump, and flipped the boat. His wife was knocked unconscious; he dragged her to shore first, because she was the first one he saw, and then could not find his children. Only the oldest girl had been wearing a life jacket. The five-year-old had taken hers off, and the mother had been holding the three-year-old boy in her lap. The current was now carrying the children south. The damaged boat had been pushed up into the mud and spiky grass along the river's edge.

Kristal and Big Leroy worked down the north bank of the Horse River. They passed the shrimp boats and the seafood packing plant, where searchers were shining flashlights under the wooden piers. Big eased the boat into the wide, shallow mouth of Cat Bait Bayou where black needle rush grew thick and blurred the transition between water and land. Before ten minutes had passed, Kristal saw a small shape bobbing in the water. "Stop!" she shouted, pointing.

Big Leroy nosed the boat in as close as he could. Roots and mud were only inches below the hull. The little boy floated facedown in the water. Kristal stretched and got hold of his foot and pulled him to her. He was wear-

ing a striped red and white shirt. He was cold, cold.

"Oh my God," she whispered. His eyes were half open, sightless. He was just a baby; his arms and legs were short and chubby. No pulse. Nothing. There was no life in him. "He's dead."

"Give him to me," Big Leroy said, grabbing the child. He laid him on the floor of the boat, tilted his head back, breathed into his mouth. He did not move. Big compressed the child's chest with the flat of his hand.

Kristal backed the boat away from the shore. "We found the little boy up Cat Bait Bayou," she said into the radio. "He appears to be deceased. Officer Purdue is administering CPR. We'll be there in two minutes."

"I'll notify the ambulance crew. The five-year-old has been found," said the marine police dispatcher coordinating the search. "She's all right."

"The five-year-old girl is okay," Kristal shouted back to Leroy. She guided the boat out into the center of the river. The wind whipped her hair over her face. She was going too fast. She eased up on the throttle. Big Leroy breathed into the child's mouth, compressed his chest five times. One breath, five pushes, one breath, five pushes: he never stopped, but the child never breathed. At the pier the

ambulance crew took over. The mother sobbed, and the found girl clung to her. They climbed into the ambulance, and it screamed away.

Kristal and Big Leroy puttered slowly back down the river, eyes searching. "Bowman let your boy go," Big said after awhile.

"Huh? Oh, you mean Eddie?" Kristal had forgotten about Eddie Fandeaux and the ZipiMart. "I was just letting him ripen."

"I told Bowman that, but you know how he is. I went back to the store and looked around this morning. The money isn't hidden anywhere I could see. Anyway, Eddie still wouldn't say what really happened."

"Did you get a chance to talk to Creel and Georgie Rollins?"

"I hadn't found 'em yet when we got this call."

"Tracy said she thought they might be out on a shrimp boat. She was a little funny about it." Kristal shut her eyes for a second. They hurt from staring, from the light dancing off the water, from lack of sleep.

The radio crackled. Big Leroy bent his head and listened intently.

"They found the other girl," he said. "She washed up against somebody's swimming dock and climbed out. They think she's got a broken leg, but she's okay."

Big Leroy turned the boat around and picked up speed.

The motor's rumble vibrated up Kristal's back. She suddenly felt unstrung and wobbly, as if she'd just finished a race. She let her hand trail in the surging water. The river was a broad expanse of glittering blue under the solid blue of the sky. She flung a palmful of river water at Big Leroy's head. Silver drops glittered in his hair.

"That's gonna cost you," he said, looking around. He reached for an orange plastic bucket on the floor of the boat. Kristal kicked it out of his reach.

"Postponed, not forgotten," Big said.

Chief Bowman was waiting for them at the wharf. He was a barrel-chested man with black hair cut like a marine's. He was not leaning on his cane; good. The days his leg hurt he was *really* a bastard. Behind him people were looking at something bundled in a wet tarpaulin on the ground. Kristal stumbled.

"Oh no," Big Leroy said. "No, it can't be the girl. They wouldn't bring her back here. She's on her way to the hospital."

Tears stung in Kristal's eyes. "Stupid fools," she said. "How hard is it to make a kid wear a life jacket?"

"Think they'll ever have a day

they don't ask themselves that?" Big said.

"Come here, see if you know this guy," Bowman called. "There wasn't anything in his pockets. They found him down below the Millers' place." That was a half mile south of Cat Bait Bayou.

A small man in denim lay curled in the wet tarpaulin. There was mud in his wispy beard and blood clotted in his coarse, curly brown hair. His skull was the wrong shape, mashed in where it should have bowed out.

"For heaven's sake," Kristal said. "This man's picture was in Eddie Fandeaux's wallet. Eddie was a baby, sitting on his lap."

"That the kid at the Zipi-Mart?" Bowman asked. "Didn't you say he was related to the Rollinses? Could this be a relative? His father?"

"Good thing you let the boy go," Kristal said.

Bowman glared at her. Estelle Patterson studied the dead man's face. "You're right," she said. "I know him. This is Buck Rollins. He's been gone forever. I think he was in jail somewhere in Texas for a while. I taught him in third or fourth grade, must be twenty-five years ago."

"Eddie's daddy robbed the ZipiMart, and Eddie covered up for him?" Kristal said speculatively.

"You said Tracy Fandeaux was cleaning house," Big Leroy said.

"Like a fiend," Kristal said. "On her hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor. And Eddie had called her from the station before I went to eat breakfast. Let's go, Big."

"Whoa!" Bowman said. "Don't go stampeding in there like a herd of goddamn elephants. Just get her to come to the station."

"Arrright," Kristal drawled. Bowman always treated all of them as if they were idiots.

"Great. That makes me feel better," Bowman said. "Where is that goddamn medical examiner?"

"He's probably lost," Estelle said calmly. "He always gets lost. I'll have Tomeka check on him."

"Don't screw this up!" Bowman yelled at Big and Kristal, who were jogging toward the unit. "Just bring the goddamn woman to the goddamn station. I want to be there when you question her."

Tracy Fandeaux's purple Pontiac was still parked in front of the cabin, but its doors were now spread wide and its seats were piled with clothes and towels and dishes. Eddie's Honda, also spread-eagled, was at the back door. Eddie was packing

boxes and filled paper bags into the trunk. A cigarette dangled from his mouth. Tough guy. He watched Kristal and Big Leroy get out of the patrol car.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Thought you said your car wasn't running," Big Leroy said.

"Got it fixed," Eddie said. "My cousin fixed it." His eyes slipped around them, fastening on the trees, the car, the other cabins, anywhere but their eyes. The freckles on his pale skin were black as ink.

"We need to talk to your mom," Big Leroy said.

"She ain't here. She went shopping," Eddie said.

"Her car's out front," Kristal said gently.

"I'm here," Tracy said, from the kitchen door. The nailed boards that were the cabin's back steps creaked under her weight. Her hair hung around her face, and she wore a shapeless red housedress.

"We need you to come to the station house, Mrs. Fandeaux," Big Leroy said.

"What for?"

"Got a couple things we want to ask you about."

"You have to tell me why, don't you? I got rights like everybody else. You can't just haul me off. Eddie, go call me a lawyer," Tracy said.

"What lawyer?" he asked.

"We'll get you a lawyer, Mrs.

Fandeaux," Kristal said. "Eddie doesn't have to take care of it."

"Just what do you mean by that, Kristal Gibson? I've always taken care of Eddie. He's my responsibility. He's my pride and joy." Tracy thumped herself on the chest. "I've gone hungry. I've done a few things I'm not too proud of. I've done whatever it took to get him raised right."

"You've done whatever it took?" Big Leroy asked.

"I ain't ashamed of nothing."

Eddie, looking out toward the river, lit another cigarette from the butt of the first one.

"Got an extra smoke, Eddie?" Kristal asked, stepping closer to him.

"Sure."

"You guys getting ready to go someplace?"

"I guess."

"You shut up, Eddie!" Tracy said.

"Mrs. Fandeaux," Big Leroy said, "I'm afraid I have to ask you again. We need you to come help us with a couple of things."

"You know what happened, don't you?" Kristal said quietly.

"What," Eddie said. It wasn't a question; there was no rising note at the end of the word. It fell between them like a pebble.

"I'm sorry, Eddie. You don't deserve all this."

"People don't get what they deserve. Good or bad," Eddie



said. "That's just a bunch of crap."

The image of a small boy in a red and white shirt floated up before Kristal's eyes. "Just and unjust alike," she said.

"Right. Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"I don't think so."

Eddie laughed soundlessly.

"Eddie!" Tracy shouted. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing."

"I said for you to be quiet."

Eddie stared at his mother standing with her arms akimbo and her feet planted in the red dirt of the driveway. "Mama, you should have called them earlier, like I told you to," he said.

"Eddie? What did you say, Eddie?" Tracy's mouth trembled. Eddie put an arm around her and led her to the patrol car. He got in with her. She began to cry.

"That son of a bitch," she said on the way into town. "How could I have gone for him twice in one lifetime?"

"Don't say nothing else, Mama," Eddie said. "Wait till you have a lawyer."

"You got some tissues, Kristal?" Tracy asked, sniffing. Kristal passed back the box.

That afternoon the forensics officers from the sheriff's department found traces of Rollins' blood and brains splattered all

over Tracy's kitchen, despite the cleaning she'd given it. Big and Duff Johnson found a bundle of bloody clothes and a rusty-looking hammer in the woods behind the cabins. And a neighbor said she'd seen Tracy bringing the little boat in early that morning.

Even before the ZipiMart robbery, things had not been working out the way Eddie had imagined. All he'd ever had of his father was the dog-eared photograph of his baby self on Buck's lap; when Buck called at Christmas, after so many years of silence, Eddie was willing to give him another chance. Tracy was warier, but she was lonely, too, and she didn't want to disappoint her son. They drove down to south Alabama. Temporarily under the spell of the Church of God's Rock, Buck made starting over seem possible to them; Tracy and Eddie moved.

Tracy, once there, seemed determined to stick; she and Buck enjoyed their rowdy Jack Spratt sex and drank together in the evenings as God's Rock's influence grew mistier. Buck borrowed Eddie's car, then his clothes, then his money. He got into the habit of stopping by the ZipiMart when Eddie was working and slipping a pack of smokes into his pocket, a six-pack under his coat. When Ed-

die asked him to stop, Buck laughed. "It ain't your stuff, it ain't like I'm taking it from you," he said. "Don't grudge this little bit to your old man."

The night the ZipiMart was robbed, Buck had dropped Eddie off at work and kept his car. He came back up to the store very late after he and Tracy ran out of beer.

"Get away from the damn beer coolers!" Eddie had yelled at him. "I'm gonna call the cops if you take another thing out of this store while I'm here."

"Hey, Eddie, I came up here to do you a favor. Got a nasty ding on your right quarter-panel, thought you oughtta take a look at it," Buck said.

"Oh, man," Eddie said. He went outside to see the imaginary dent. Eddie had been foolish enough to complain about the broken security camera at home a week or so earlier; Buck emptied the cash register and took three six-packs.

Eddie saw the open cash drawer through the window.

"It ain't like it's your money," Buck said, calmly setting the beer on the passenger seat. "Just wait a couple of minutes, call the cops, tell them some black guy held you up."

"Put the money back," Eddie said, feeling sick. "Come on, Buck."

But Buck got in the car. "Don't

tell your mom, now. Don't make this into a big deal. I won't be able to come around no more if you tell her."

"That'd break my heart."

"It'd break your mom's, anyway. Don't be such a damned baby," Buck said. He drove away. And Eddie lied for him; lying seemed like a better solution than telling the truth somehow, or at least it did when Eddie was thinking things through by himself.

Buck took the beer back to Cabin Five, drank it, and fell asleep on the vinyl couch. After Eddie called from jail, Tracy went through Buck's pockets and found a wad of money he hadn't possessed earlier.

He woke up while she was counting it. When Tracy picked up the phone to call the police station, Rollins hit her. He chased her into the kitchen, and she split his skull with the hammer she kept on top of the refrigerator. She wrapped his body up in an old tarpaulin, took him out on the river, and jettisoned him under somebody's fishing pier.

Tracy Fandeaux spent four weeks in Mobile's Metro Jail. Then, after consulting with her public defender and the assistant district attorney, she pled guilty to manslaughter and took

the gray bus north to Julia Tutwiler Prison.

In August Eddie came by the station to see Kristal. He'd gained some weight. His hair sprang out from his dirty red baseball cap in bushy little coils. He'd caught her on the front porch, on her way home.

"I'm moving back to Montgomery," Eddie said. "I'm gonna live with our old preacher's folks and get my welding certificate." He took his hat off and rubbed his sleeve across his wet forehead. The air was heavy and thick; inhaling was like breathing lint. To the west, green trees tossed against a black sky. It would storm soon.

"Good luck. You'll be near your mom, then, won't you?" Julia Tutwiler was just outside Montgomery.

"Yeah."

"She okay?"

"I guess. She's real religious now. Hey, I'm sorry about all the mess with my folks and the Zipi-Mart."

"Bless your heart, Eddie, it's just a day's work to me," she said, patting his shoulder. "You're all right, though."

"I shoulda made him stop. I shoulda told you sooner."

"Let's not get confused about who did what," Kristal said. "He was wrong to put you on the spot like that."

"Yes, ma'am. I gotta go, my ride's waiting." Eddie hesitated as if wondering whether he should hug her goodbye, but then he just shook her hand vigorously and leaped away down the steps as if he were getting out of jail all over again.

*For back issues, send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.*

FICTION

# Saturday Night at the Mikado Massage Loren D. Estleman

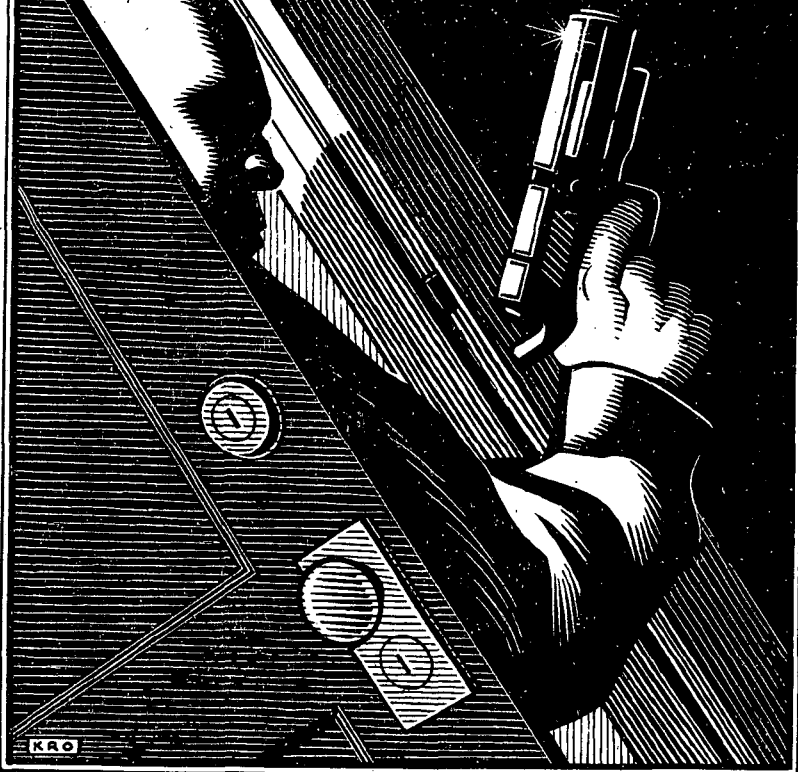


Illustration by Dan Krovat

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

---

The ironic thing about the night Mr. Ten Fifty-Five died on Iiko's table was that she was supposed to have that Saturday off.

She'd asked for the time three weeks in advance so she could spend the weekend with Uncle Trinh, who was coming to visit from Corpus Christi, Texas, where he worked on a shrimp boat, but the day before his bus left, he slipped on some fish scales and broke his leg. Now he needed money for doctors' bills, and Iiko had volunteered to work.

The Mikado Massage was located on Michigan Avenue in Detroit. On one side was an empty building that had once sheltered a travel agency. The Mystic Arts Bookshop was on the other and shared a common wall with the Mikado. There was a fire door in this wall, which came in handy during election years. When the mayor sent police with warrants, they invariably found the bookshop full of customers and the massage parlor empty. On the third Sunday of every month a man came to collect for the service of keeping the owner informed about these visits. Iiko had seen the man's picture under some printing on the side of a van with a loudspeaker on the roof. Detroit was the same as back home except for no Ho Chi Minh on the billboards.

Although its display in the yellow pages advertised an all-Japanese staff, the Mikado's owner, Mr. Shigeta, was the only person in residence not Korean or Vietnamese, and he was never seen by the customers unless one of them became ungallant. He was a short, thick man of fifty-five or seventy with hair exactly like a seal's, who claimed to have stood in for Harold Sakata on the set of *Goldfinger* and had papered his little office with posters and lobby cards from the film. He kept a bottle of Polish vodka and a jar of pickled eggs in a crawlspace behind the radiator.

Iiko had been working there four months. She made less than the other masseuses because she was still on probation after a police visit to the Dragon's Gate in the suburb of Inkster, which had no fire door, and so she gave only massages, no specials. She kept track of the two months remaining on her sentence on a Philgas calendar inside her locker door.

The man she called Mr. Ten Fifty-Five always showed up at that time on Saturday night and always asked for Iiko. Because he reminded her a little of Uncle Trinh, she'd thought to do him a kindness and had explained to him, in her imperfect English, that he could get the same massage for much less at any hotel,

but he said he preferred the Mikado. The hotels didn't offer Japanese music or heated floors or scented oils or a pink bulb in a table lamp with a paper kimono shade.

Normally, Saturday was the busiest night of the week, but this was the Saturday after Thanksgiving, when, as Mr. Shigeta explained, the customers remembered they were family men and stayed home. Mr. Ten Fifty-Five, therefore, was the only person she'd seen since early evening when Mr. Shigeta had gone home, leaving her in charge.

Mr. Ten Fifty-Five was duck-shaped and bald, with funny gray tufts that stood out on both sides of his head when he waddled in from the shower in a towel and sprawled facedown on the table. He often fell asleep the moment she began to rub him down and didn't wake up even when she walked on his back, so it wasn't until she asked him to turn over that Iiko found out that this time he'd died.

Iiko recognized death. She'd been only a baby when the last American soldier left her village, but she remembered the marauding gangs that swept through after the Fall of Saigon, claiming to be hunting rebels but forcing themselves upon the women and carrying away tins

of food and silver picture frames and setting the buildings on fire when they left. Iiko's brother Nguyen, sixteen years old, had tried to block the door of their parents' home, but one of the visitors stuck a bayonet between his ribs and planted a boot on his face to tug loose the blade. Iiko hung on to her mother's skirt during the walk to the cemetery. The skirt was white, the color of mourning in Vietnam, with a border of faded flowers at the hem.

When Iiko confirmed that Mr. Ten Fifty-Five's heart had stopped, she went through his clothes. This was much easier than picking pockets in Ho Chi Minh City, where one always ran the risk of being caught with one's hand in the pocket of another pickpocket. Iiko found car keys, a little plastic bottle two-thirds full of tiny white pills, a tattered billfold containing fifty-two dollars, and a folding knife with a stag handle and a blade that had been ground down to a quarter inch wide. She placed it and the money in the pocket of her smock and returned the clothes to the back of the chair. The tail of the shabby coat clunked when it flapped against a chair leg.

Iiko investigated. There was a lump at the bottom where the machine stitch that secured the lining had been replaced by a



clumsy crosshatch of thread that didn't match the original. This came loose easily, and she removed a small green cloth sack with a drawstring, whose contents caught the pink light in seven spots of reflected purple. When she switched on the overhead bulb, the stones, irregular ovals the size of the charcoal bits she swept weekly from the brazier in the sauna, turned deep blue.

She found a place for the stones, then went out into the little reception area to call Mr. Shigeta at home. He would want to know that a customer had died so that when the police came they would find nothing of interest except a dead customer. While she was dialing, two men came in.

Both were Americans. One, a large black man with a face that was all jutting bones, wore jeans, a sweatshirt, and a Pistons jacket. He towered over his companion, a white man with small features and sandy hair done up elaborately, wearing a shiny black suit with a pinched waist and jagged lapels. Their eyes continued to move around the room after the men had come to a stop a few feet from the counter.

"Sorry, we close," Iiko said.

She was standing in front of the sign that said OPEN TILL MIDNIGHT.

"You're back open," said the sandy-haired man. "Long enough anyway to tell us where's the fat bald guy that came in here about eleven."

She shook her head, indicating that she didn't understand. It was not entirely a lie. The sandy-haired man, who did almost all the talking, spoke very fast.

"Come on, girlie, we know he's here. His car's outside."

"The stuff ain't in it, neither," said the black man.

"Shut up, Leon."

"Not know," said Iiko.

"Leon."

The black man put a hand inside his jacket and brought out a big silver gun with a twelve inch barrel. He pointed it at her and thumbed back the hammer.

The sandy man said, "Leon's killed three men and a woman, but he's never to my knowledge done a slant. Where's George?"

"Not know George," she said.

"Keep it on her. If she jumps, take off her head." The sandy man came around the counter.

Iiko stood still while the man ran his hands over her smock. She didn't even move when they lingered at her small breasts and crotch. He took the fifty-two dollars and the knife from her pockets. He showed Leon the knife.

"That's George's shank, all right," said the black man. "He

carries it open when he has to walk more'n a block to his car. He's almost as scared of muggers as he is of guns."

The sandy man slapped Iiko's face. She remained unmoving. She could feel the hot imprint of his palm on her cheek.

"One more time before we disturb the peace, Dragon Lady. Where's George Myrtle?"

She turned and went through the door behind the counter. The two men followed.

In the massage room the sandy man felt behind Mr. Ten Fifty-Five's ear, then said, "Deader'n Old Yeller."

"I don't see no marks," Leon said.

"Of course not. Look at him. He as good as squiffed himself the day he topped two forty and started taking elevators instead of climbing the stairs. I bet he never said no to a second helping of mashed potatoes in his life. Check out his clothes."

Leon returned the big gun to a holster under his left arm and quickly turned out all the pockets of the coat and trousers, then with a grunt held the coat upside-down and showed his companion the place where the lining had been pulled loose.

The sandy man looked at Iiko. She saw something in his pale eyes that she remembered from the day her brother was killed.

"This ain't turning out the

way I figured," the sandy man said. "I was looking forward to watching Leon bat around that tub of guts until he told us what he done with them hot rocks. I sure don't enjoy watching him do that to a woman. Especially not to a pretty little China doll like you. How's about sparing me that and telling me what you did with the merch?"

"Not know merch," she said truthfully.

Leon started toward her. The sandy man stopped him with a hand. He was still looking at Iiko.

"You got more of these rooms?" he asked.

After a moment she nodded and stepped in the direction of the curtain over the doorway. The black man's bulk blocked that path.

"Search the rest of the place, Leon. I'll take care of this."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

Leon went out. Iiko led the sandy man through the curtains and across the narrow hallway. This room was larger, although still small. A forest of bottles containing scented oils stood on a rack beside the massage table. The sandy man seized her arm and spun her around. They were close now, and the light in his eyes had changed. She could smell his aftershave, sticky and sharp.

"You're sure a nice little piece for a slant. I bet old George had some times with you. Especially at the end."

Iiko didn't struggle.

The sandy man said, "I could use a little rub myself. You rub me, I rub you. What do you say? Then we'll talk."

After a moment she nodded. "Take off clothes."

"You first."

He let go of her and stepped back, his small hard fists dangling at his sides. He watched her unbutton and peel off the smock. Without hesitating, she undid her halter top and stepped out of her shorts. She wore no underthings. She knew her body was good, firm and well-proportioned for her small frame. She could see in his eyes he approved.

He took a long breath and let it out. Then he took off his shiny black coat. He hung his suit carefully on the wooden hanger on the wall peg, folded his shirt and put it on the seat of the chair. His ribs showed, but his pale, naked arms and legs were sinewy, the limbs of a runner.

He saw that she saw. "I work out. I ain't going to do you no favor like George and clock out on the table."

She said nothing. He stretched out on his stomach on the padded table. "No oil," he said.

"I don't want to ruin my clothes. Just powder."

She reached for the can of talcum. While her back was turned to him, she laid down the folding knife she had removed from the sandy man's pocket while he was holding her, poking it behind a row of bottles.

She sprinkled the powder on his back, set down the can, and worked her hands along his spine and scapula. His muscles jumped and twitched beneath her palms, not at all like the loose, unresisting flesh of Mr. Ten Fifty-Five. She had the impression the sandy man was poised to leap off the table at the first sign of suspicious behavior. She heard glass breaking in another part of the building as Leon continued his search for the blue stones.

Iiko was a good masseuse. Unlike some of her fellow employees, who merely went through the motions until the big moment when they asked the customers to turn over, Iiko had been trained by a licensed massage therapist. She flattered herself that she still managed to give satisfaction even under the strictures of probation. Gradually she felt the sandy man's body relax beneath her expert hands.

To maintain contact, she kept one palm on his lower spine while with the other she retrieved the knife from its hiding

place on the rack of bottles, pried it open with her teeth, and with one swift underhand motion jammed the blade into his back as far as it would go and dragged it around his right kidney as if she were coring an apple. The sandy man made very little noise dying.

When the body had ceased to shudder, she dressed and left the room. The sound of a heavy piece of furniture scraping across a wooden floor told her that Leon was moving the desk in Mr. Shigeta's office. The way to the front door and out led directly past that room; she did not want to take the chance of running into the black man as he came out. She let herself into the Mystic Arts Bookshop by way of the fire door in the wall that separated the two establishments.

The shop had been closed for hours. She groped her way through darkness to the front door but found that exit barred by a deadbolt lock that required a key. The same was true of the back door. An ornamental grid sealed the windows. For a moment Iiko stood still and waited for her thoughts to settle. It would not be long before Leon discovered the sandy man's body, and then he would find the fire door. The lock was on the massage parlor side.

She switched on a light. Tall racks of musty-smelling books divided the room into narrow aisles. She removed a heavy dictionary from the reference section, carried it to the common wall, and set the book on the floor in front of the steel door. She repeated the procedure with another large book and then another. At the end of ten minutes she had erected a formidable barrier. Then she sat down to catch her breath and wait.

She did not wait long. She jumped when the thumb latch went down, stood and backed away instinctively when the door moved a fraction of an inch and stopped, impeded by the stacked books. She had already located the telephone on a cluttered counter near the front door of the bookshop; now she lifted the receiver, dialed 911, and, when the operator came on, laid the receiver on its side facing the fire door.

Just then Leon pushed the door hard. Two of the stacks fell, creating an avalanche. Encouraged, the black man gave a lunge. More books tumbled, but now the pile was wedged tightly between the door and the first rack. It would not budge further.

Iiko switched off the light. A bank of deep shadow appeared on the side of the fire door near-

est the latch, and she slipped into it noiselessly. The black man had worked up a sweat searching the Mikado for the missing stones. She could smell the clean sharp sting of it where she crouched.

Nothing stirred in the bookshop. She heard the black man's heavy breathing as he paused to gather his strength, heard the buzzing queries of the 911 operator coming through the earpiece of the telephone a dozen steps away.

With an explosive grunt, Leon threw all his weight against the door. The pile of books crumpled against the base of the rack. The rack teetered, tilted, hung at a twenty-degree angle for an impossible length of time; then it toppled. Books plummeted from its shelves. To the operator listening at police headquarters it must have sounded like an artillery barrage. Leon thrust his arm and shoulder through the widened opening. The big silver gun made the arm look ridiculously long. His entire body seemed to swell with the effort to squeeze past the edge of the door. He grunted again, and the noise turned into a howl of triumph as he stumbled into the bookshop.

But his eyes were not accustomed to the darkness, and he set his foot on a poorly balanced book that turned under his

weight. He sprawled headlong across the pile.

The opening into the massage parlor was more than wide enough for Iiko. She darted through, and before Leon could get to his feet, she seized the door handle and yanked it shut behind her, flicking the lock button with her thumb.

In the next minute it didn't matter that the 911 operator could hear the black man pounding the steel door with his fists. The air was shrill with sirens, red and blue strobes throbbed through the windows of the Mikado. Gravel pelted the side of the building as the police cruisers skidded around the corner into the parking lot of the Mystic Arts.

Iiko did not pay much attention to the bullhorn-distorted demands for surrender next door, or even the rattle of gunfire when Leon, exhausted and confused by the turn of events since he and the sandy man had entered the Mikado, burst a lock and plunged out into the searchlights with the big silver gun in his hand. She was busy with the narrow metal dustpan she used to clean out the brazier in the sauna, sifting through the smoldering bits of charcoal in the bottom. The stones were covered with soot and difficult to distinguish from the coals, but when she washed them in the sink

they shone with the same icy blueness that had caught her eye in the massage room.

The glowing coals had burned away the green cloth bag as she'd known they would. She wrapped the stones carefully in a flannel facecloth, put the bundle in the side pocket of the cloth coat she drew on over her smock, and started toward the front door. Then she remembered the fifty-two dollars the sandy man had taken from her and put in the pocket of his shiny black suit.

The sandy man was as she'd

left him, naked and dead, only paler than before. She thrust the money into her other side pocket and went out.

Waiting at the corner for the bus, Iiko thought she would take the stones to the pawnshop man who bought the jewelry and gold money clips she managed from time to time to take from the clothing of her customers. The pawnshop man knew many people and had always dealt with her honestly. She hoped the stones would sell for enough to settle some of Uncle Trinh's doctors' bills.

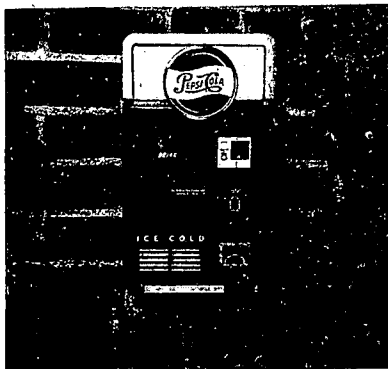
*Important Notice to Subscribers: All subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, Iowa 51593-5124. For change of address, please advise six to eight weeks before moving. Send us your current mailing label with new address. Call 800-333-3311 with questions about your subscription.*



# Lifestyles Emporium

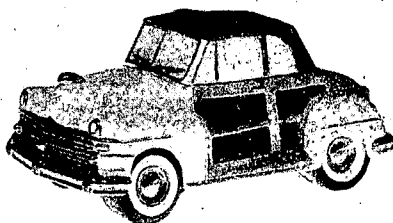
The Red White & Blue is a perfect addition to the family room, den, or home office. The fully functional, wall-mounted tone/pulse phone features an on/off ringer and light switch, star/pound buttons and a last number redial. It comes with a detachable 6' coil cord, AT&T wall bracket and battery back-up for the ringer light. (Uses 4 "AA" batteries—not included.)  
#LE 505

## Pepsi-Cola® Telephone



**\$45.<sup>98</sup>** (plus \$6.<sup>95</sup> S&H)

Capture the Magic of a Time Gone By - Park the hand-painted cookie jar in your kitchen and relive a simpler time.  
**"WOODY" Cookie Jar**



**\$64.<sup>98</sup>** (plus \$7.<sup>95</sup> S&H)

This collector's item is both beautiful and functional. A generous 6" high by 13 3/4" wide, it stores many a chocolate chip. A finely detailed replica of Americana that will last for many years. #LE 404.

**Call Toll Free**

**1-800-580-9445**

**Ask for Dept A1**



**Check or Money Order To:**

**Point to Point Dept A1**

**PO Box 2007**

**Brick, NJ 08723**

**NJ Residents Add 6% Sales Tax/ Canadian Orders Add \$6.00**

**Satisfaction Guaranteed - 30 Day Money Back for Exchange or Refund**

*Advertisement*

**LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED**

FICTION

# YOU CAN'T REALLY BLAME THEM

Steve Ritchie



Illustration by Carolina Yao

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

“Mr. Wilke, you’re under arrest on the charge of counterfeiting,” the Treasury agent told me. It was not an entirely unexpected development.

I stood by as the Treasury agents continued to search my workshop. When it seemed they were running into problems telling what was part of my counterfeiting operation and what was just an ordinary part of the shop, I offered to cooperate and show them what they were looking for.

You can’t really blame them, though: none of them had ever arrested anyone for counterfeiting one-dollar coins.

In fact, no one had been arrested for creating his own coins in any of the agents’ lifetimes. When I was doing the basic research for my project, I found that the last case had been in 1937 when several men were arrested in Tennessee for casting lead and glass fifty-cent pieces in the backwoods.

But of course my own creations were much better than their crude sandcast slugs.

The agents had a brief discussion about the hydraulic press. It had been the central part of my operation. You see, coins are normally stamped in a specialized stamping machine about the size and shape of a filing cabinet. But with the price of machine tools these days—and the fact that the Treasury Department keeps track of such presses—I had to make do with what I had. The room-sized hydraulic press had originally been the cornerstone of Wilke Metal Fabrication, my failed business.

Rather than attempt to seize the press, the agents decided to photograph it from all angles and place evidence seals around the controls. Legally it was seized, and no one could use it without committing a felony. Not that it mattered much; my business had been slowly dwindling for two years, and the only employee I had left was undoubtedly their informant.

Finally they finished gathering evidence. The agents sealed the building and took me to the local police department for preliminary questioning before transferring me to a federal prison. I was placed in a holding cell while they prepared the paperwork they needed to question me.

Several hours later I was led to an interrogation room. I waived my rights to have my attorney present; I told them I was ready to make a full confession. I wouldn’t need my attorney until afterwards.

Three agents were in the interrogation room. One maintained a

watch over the tape recorder, and the other two sat across from me at the table. Each seat had its own microphone on a flexible arm much like a gooseneck lamp.

They introduced themselves, and the questioning began.

Agent McKillen picked up a typewritten list and read the first item. "Please state your name," he said.

"Robert Decatuer Wilke," I answered into the microphone.

"Decatuer?" asked the second man, Agent DeLoughery.

I nodded. "Both my parents grew up in small towns near Decatuer. They both yearned for the bright lights and excitement of the city."

Agent DeLoughery frowned; I don't think he entirely believed me. "Just answer the questions," he said. "We don't need the family history."

I smiled and took a sip of water.

Returning to his list, Agent McKillen continued. "State your occupation."

"I am owner and operator of Wilke Tool and Die," I said. "Or at least I was. We specialized in powder metallurgy."

"Please explain the nature of your business."

"We created dies—molds, really—which we filled with metal powder that was compressed into solids. That allows you to create complex pieces in one operation, usually with metals or alloys that can't be cast normally. We did a lot of work in tungsten, but that was before the Cold War ended and we lost all our contracts."

After a few more preliminary questions about how my business operated they got down to the counterfeiting charge.

Agent DeLoughery slid a coin across the table. "Did you make this coin?" he asked.

I picked up the coin and took a close look at it. It was a low-quality reject, not the sort of example I liked to let out of the shop. In place of the top of Susan B. Anthony's head was a rough, concave surface. Actually a very simple problem—an uneven distribution of powder in the mold—but one that had been difficult to create purposely.

"Oh my," I said, feigning surprise. "Where did you get this one? I thought I'd destroyed all the bad ones. Is this how you caught me?"

"Please answer the question," said McKillen. "Did you make this coin in your shop?"

"Yes, I did," I admitted. "But this is a bad example. The ones in the shop were all much better than this one." I turned the coin over

in my hand. "The final version was much better than this. Luckily, the Susan B. Anthony was designed as a solid piece. If it were more like a quarter, with a layer of copper in the middle, it would have been much harder to copy."

"How many people were involved in its manufacture?" DeLoughery asked.

I took another sip of water. "No one else. I made the molds, calculated the right mix of metal powders, and pressed the coins by myself. Pat had nothing to do with it."

Actually, while Pat was not involved in the counterfeiting, he *had* been involved in my arrest. Getting Pat to turn me in had actually ended up being one of the hardest parts. I planted a total of five rejects where he would see them before it occurred to him that something illegal was going on. But you really can't blame him—a lot of kids his age have never even seen a Susan B. Anthony dollar.

Agent McKillen signaled the agent operating the tape recorder. The other agent nodded back, and McKillen smiled. Now that my confession was officially recorded, it was an open and shut case.

"Just a few more questions and we'll be done for today," McKillen said. "Why did you counterfeit the coins?" he asked.

"Because I needed the money," I said. It was perfectly true.

"But why coins? Why not twenty-dollar bills?"

I shrugged. "I'm not a printer. Powder metallurgy is what I know."

"Kind of an expensive way to make money, isn't it?" asked DeLoughery. He checked his notes. "According to your office records, each dollar coin must have cost about eighty cents to make. That's not much profit for a counterfeiter."

Actually, the cost had been closer to one dollar and five cents. But you can't blame them—it takes years of practice to be able to price out a job like this. They'd probably underestimated the time needed to make the molds. It's a common mistake.

I leaned on the table and explained. "Whenever you start a new job, your unit prices are going to be high for the first few batches, especially if they're small." I looked over at Agent McKillen. "The cost of your molds is part of the overall cost. When you make more pieces, the cost is spread out over more batches, and your unit cost goes down. And you save a lot by buying your supplies in bulk."

McKillen nodded. "That makes sense," he said. It wouldn't have if he'd known I purposely limited my production to five hundred coins.

"How were you going to pass the coins?" DeLoughery asked.

I shrugged. "I like to think they're good enough to pass anywhere," I said. "But I didn't have time to find out."

"So you didn't pass any of the coins?"

"That's right. You have all of them," I answered. The only coins in existence, as they very well knew, were the five hundred they'd found in the shop. I had made sure my records were very clear on that. The Treasury Department had possession of all of them, and the additional five rejects I had put out for Pat.

Agent McKillen leaned back in his chair. "Just one more question for now. Why did you put a *W* on as a mint mark? Why not a *D* or a *P*?"

I had wondered if they would bother looking that closely at my coins. I grinned. "Well, I thought I'd done a pretty good job, and I wanted to sign it. Putting *Wilke* on them would have made it a little too easy for you guys."

Both agents smiled at my answer. They knew as well as I did that the artist's urge to sign his work has caught more than one counterfeiter.

After a quick check to make sure my interview had been properly recorded, Agent DeLoughery called an officer to return me to the holding cell. The agents assured me that since I was a cooperating first-time offender, and I hadn't passed any of the coins, my sentence would be relatively short. They said I might get as little as five years, two with good behavior.

My own estimate placed it at about a day and a half.

That was assuming I had set everything up correctly, that is. I had used my one phone call to let my lawyer know where I was. He would know what to do. After all, weeks ago I had asked him to research the very federal laws I was being charged under. I figured it would take one day to convince the authorities and half a day for the paperwork. But they would eventually have to let me go, for I was an innocent man—confession notwithstanding.

Actually, it took two days.

I spent the time reading magazines and sleeping. The food was much better than I had expected, and I was allowed to have seconds at dinner. I even had a pleasant chat with one of the guards. Turns out his father was a machinist, and he had a grandfather who was arrested for counterfeiting ration stamps during World War II. We had a lot to talk about.

I was in the middle of my fifth jailhouse meal when an officer came to take me back to the interrogation room.



I sat in the same chair as before. But this time my lawyer and one additional agent were present.

My lawyer made the introduction. "Bob, this is Agent Duwe. He's the head of operations for the Treasury Department's local field office. I believe you know the other two agents."

"Yes," I said. "They took my confession."

Agent Duwe grimaced. "Right. I'd like to make this session brief. First I want to go over some of the questions the agents asked you at your interrogation."

"Go right ahead," I said. "I have nothing to hide."

Duwe went over the same questions as before, and I gave the same answers, with only the occasional interruption from my lawyer. You can't really blame him—he didn't want me accidentally incriminating myself. Not that there was much chance of that.

There was really only one issue that might cause problems, and I had been very careful to avoid it.

"Did you pass any of the coins?" asked Agent Duwe.

I shook my head. "Not a one," I said. "I made five hundred, and you have them all."

"Five hundred and five, according to the inventory," said Duwe.

I looked towards Agents DeLoughery and McKillen, who were standing to one side. "The extra five coins must all be rejects that got away," I said. "But I didn't spend a single one. If you take a look at my records, you'll see."

Agent Duwe sighed and rubbed his temple. "We already have."

There was a long silence as Duwe looked over the transcript from my confession. DeLoughery and McKillen fidgeted in the corner, while my lawyer doodled madly on a legal pad. I was perfectly calm, though I felt a twinge of sympathy for the arresting agents.

Finally Duwe looked up. "All right. Mr. Wilke, you're free to go."

I started to stand up, but Duwe held up a hand. "But first I want to remind you that counterfeiting money is a serious crime. It is punishable by up to twenty years in a federal prison."

I couldn't resist smiling. "I know. But I didn't counterfeit money—I made coins."

"Yes, technically coins aren't money," Agent Duwe said. "They're an item of convenience, and not considered legal tender. But spending them is still fraud, which is also a federal crime."

My smile grew a little larger. "Lucky I didn't spend any of them then," I said somewhat impishly.

"Very lucky," said Agent Duwe. "If I had my way, you'd be on your

way to prison right now. But don't think you got away with anything—you're on our list now. Try to make any more coins and spend them, and you'll be in jail before you get your change."

I raised my right hand and said, "Agent Duwe, I hereby promise that I will never make any more coins, nor will I try to pass a fake coin as real." I lowered my hand. "If we're finished here, I'd like to take my coins and go home now."

Needless to say, there was a certain amount of confusion at that point.

It took a lot of arguing, and in the end I had to go to court. But the issue boiled down to the fact that since coins are not legal tender it was not illegal to manufacture or own them. The only crime that the Treasury Department could have charged me with would have been fraud, but there was no evidence that I had passed any of the coins. Which had been the mistake of the Tennessee counterfeiters in 1937.

Legally, I was free and clear and allowed to keep the coins. Of course I couldn't spend them, but then I had never intended to.

With the return of my coins I was able to enter the final phase of my plan. Three weeks later, I attended the Fortieth Annual Midwest Coin Show.

"Are you *sure* this is legal?" the man on the other side of table asked me. He held one of my coins in its protective plastic case.

"Absolutely," I explained for the hundredth time that day. "Coins aren't legal tender, so owning a counterfeit isn't illegal. Just don't try spending it."

"No, I wouldn't want to do that," he said. He examined the coin with a pocket loupe. "Not at five hundred dollars each."

Business was brisk. Nearly every collector in attendance had heard about my arrest and the subsequent court action, and I had been showing the coins all day. So far I had sold fifteen of them.

"I can't guarantee the price for very long," I said. "There's a lot of demand for them. The price will be going up soon."

"The mintmark is a nice touch," he said.

I smiled. With such good reproductions, the mintmark had been vital. Collectors had to be sure they were buying authentically counterfeit coins. It was a legal transaction, as selling the coins as counterfeits was perfectly legal. And a lot more profitable.

"How many did you say there were?" the man asked.

"Exactly five hundred," I answered. I had of course destroyed the five rejects as soon as I could. I didn't want their rarity interfering

with the demand for the rest of the coins. And I must admit that I am a bit of a perfectionist.

"All right," the man said. "I'll take it." He got out his wallet and counted out five hundred dollar bills.

Coin collectors are a strange group. Some very rare coins sell for much less than they should, and a few almost common ones sell for hundreds. What really determines the price is the story behind the coin. And, of course, the story behind mine had been national news.

"Mind if I ask a question?" the man asked. "What gave you the idea to make these?"

"Someone came up to me with a five dollar bill and asked if I could make change," I said, smiling. Actually it had been a magazine article about a counterfeiter in the 1800's. Demand for his fakes was so great that con men were altering authentic coins to make them look counterfeit. I realized then that there was a market for homemade coins.

I put the five hundred dollars in a portable safe and got out another coin for the next customer to examine. After booth rental and other expenses I had already made over six thousand dollars. I figured that if I sold the coins carefully as the price went up I should make enough to retool my shop and start a new business.

Last I heard, Agent Duwe was trying to get Congress to change the law to make sure no one could counterfeit any more coins. It may also outlaw ownership, but by the time it passes, I will have sold every last one. The Treasury Department is very upset with me.

You can't really blame them.

FICTION

# That Midnight Train

Raymond Steiber

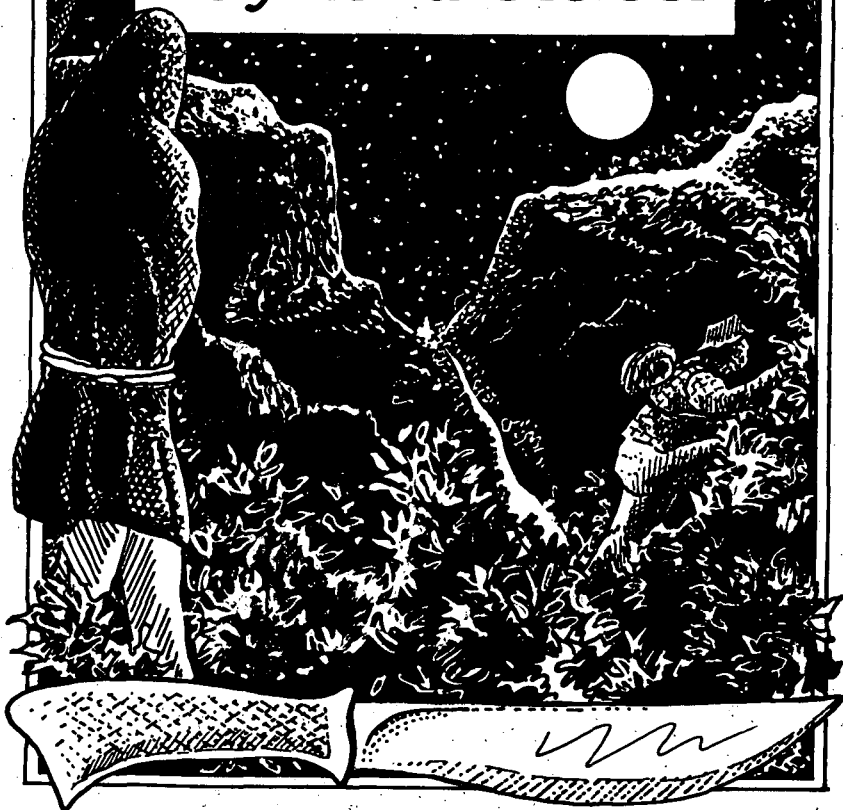


Illustration by Laurie Davis

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

---

---

**I**t was dusk outside the clapboard house, and when the man leaned forward, he seemed to block all the light from the window. On the old tired couch the two teenage boys sort of scrunched up as if trying to get out of his way.

He said, "Now tell me what you saw. Tell me slow and careful."

The boys' eyes were big and white in the semidarkness. One of them said, "We'uns didn't steal Mr. Gilly's boat. We just borrowed it for awhile—for two days most. Then we was gonna bring it back."

"I don't care about that. I just want to know what happened at the bridge."

"We wanted to see that *thing*. That thing that comes lookin' for its *head* every night."

"The trainman's ghost."

"Yeah—*him*. He lost it a long time ago—maybe a hunnert years ago—in some dumb accident on that bridge. And now every night about *midnight* he comes looking for it with an old redeye bull's-eye lantern."

"The headless corpse."

"Yeah—and we *seed* him!"

The other boy nodded vigorously. "We seed him bigger than anything."

"Did he see you?"

"Naw—we left the boat round the bend and hid up in the woods. We had us a knife and an

ole .22 rabbit rifle. We wasn't even afraid—not at first. Then that train come along—"

"Train? On *those* tracks?"

"Yessir. We seed the big ole headlight. We heard it rumbling across the bridge. Then after it was gone, the man came, the *haint*! That ole bull's-eye lantern of his swung back and forth like he was searching for something. Then he found it and picked it up and carried it back with him. We seed it dangling there in the light of the lantern, and it was all dripping and horrible."

"You saw *what* dangling there?"

"His *head*—he found his head! He found it right there in the middle of that ole bridge. Right where he lost it the first time!"

**S**he came out of the cutting, and there was the bridge. It was an old wooden trestle bridge, and it crossed the gorge of the Talapassi River in a straight line. The pinetar-treated wood was gray with age, and the whole shebang looked as creaking and insecure as a year-old spiderweb stretching in the breeze.

She ventured out on it. There were no guardrails, and in the blank places between the ties she could see empty air and then the green river, far below,

creaming through the gorge. Hear it, too—like the white noise on a radio tuned to a place where there isn't a station.

The tracks stretched out before her, vanishing into the fall colors of the opposite shore. A mile or so ahead, she knew, the track ended. And it was the same behind. An old abandoned railway line, most of it ripped up for scrap during World War II, surrounded by miles and miles of Southern forest, and this bridge, enduring in the autumn sunshine.

All at once she felt a presence behind her and turned, half expecting to see Jeanne. Because somehow she sensed her here, her essence—like the wind moving through the gorge. But there was nothing—just the overgrown cut where the tracks came through from the ridge.

She brushed a hand through her long black hair streaked now with strands of white. She had long tan legs, and the full-length mirror in her bathroom told her that they were still attractive—but maybe that was just her eyes lying to her ego. She was forty-two years old. She worked as a program analyst at Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. She had never married, but she had a full-grown daughter named Jeanne. But maybe that last wasn't true any more. And maybe what

made it not true had happened in this very place.

She retreated to solid ground, shouldered off her backpack, and sat on it with her knees drawn up. The sun was beginning to coast along the tops of the trees on the opposite ridge. It would be dark soon. She needed to find a place to camp, gather up some firewood. She didn't think she'd much like it out here tonight, and she momentarily regretted not having that girl from the store along—Suggins' girl.

"I don't think you ought to go out there alone," Suggins had said. "You take my daughter along with you—hear? She's a little simple, but she's got a good heart and she's fit for anything. And if you know any games—simple games you can play around a campfire—why she'll keep you good company. She *loves* games."

It was Suggins who had told her how to get to the bridge. "The trail's none too good, but if you get lost, all you got to do is follow any west-flowing stream. That'll take you to the river, and from where we are now, the bridge'll be upstream."

Her daughter Jeanne had come into Suggins' store to get the same advice not three months before. That boy had been with her—not a boy really, twenty-something—Jack Alcott



of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They'd been hiking the Appalachian Trail, and they'd cut down here so they could spy on the bridge and its famous ghost. Scare themselves silly over fireflies, and then use it as an excuse for huddling and making love. About what I did with her father, she thought ruefully. Except that they hadn't needed any ghosts to set them off.

That had been in July. Jeanne—sweet nineteen-year-old Jeanne—and her boyfriend had walked out of the store and then—just disappeared. Walked off the face of the earth, vanished into thin air. The police had searched, hikers had searched, well-meaning civilian pilots had flown the treetops panicking the deer, and none of them had found anything. Not so much as a lost comb or a bright empty packet of trail grub.

And now she herself had come—hoping at least to put an end to the agony of not knowing. Come to this bridge and gorge—the last known destination of her daughter.

She sat on her backpack and whispered to the softening air of late afternoon. "Jeanne, did you get this far? Did you sit where I'm now sitting? Are you . . . near?"

And the breeze seemed to answer, "... Yes . . ."

A shiver ran up her spine as if she'd really heard that word. Then she *did* hear something. A large something crashing through the underbrush on the slope below the bridge.

She stood up. She reached down for the strap on her backpack. She climbed the steep bank of the cut and eased into the shadow of the trees. The something was blundering up the slope. It was coming here, *to this place*. She undid the snap on one of the pockets of the backpack. She might have come alone, but she hadn't come unprepared. Her hand emerged holding a purse-size automatic pistol.

She knelt there beside the bole of a tree and felt both frightened and absurd. Ruth Whitaker with a technical degree from N. C. State and a nearly paid-for condominium in Raleigh, hiding in the woods like—*what?*—like Nancy Drew. But it wasn't absurd that she should come looking for her daughter—not when everyone else had given up.

The crashing grew louder. Then all at once a figure heaved itself out of the undergrowth where the bridge joined the cut.

She thrust the pistol slightly forward. It was a man. A black man in a torn pair of Levi's and an old work shirt. He had a jacket tied up in a roll on his back

and wore a floppy old hat—a fisherman's hat. His beard was grizzled with white, and so was his short-cut hair. He was huge—six four, six five at least—and his hands were big enough to make matchwood of any of the old rotten ties on the bridge.

His chest heaved from the long climb up from the river, and his forehead was shiny with sweat. He ran a sleeve across it. Then he retrieved a plastic cola bottle from his rolled-up jacket. The bottle was filled with water. He unscrewed the cap and chugged a-lugged half of it, his Adam's apple working manfully.

Ruth watched him, breathing shallowly, trying to make herself unheard.

He stowed the bottle again. His eyes ran left and right, coasting over everything in sight.

She held her breath.

The eyes passed her hiding place. He stepped out on the bridge, looking uncomfortable with the idea but doing it anyway. He knelt and ran his hand over one of the tracks. Then he rose and gazed at the opposite side. He turned around. A couple of pines had grown up on either side of the cut. He seemed to examine each in turn. Something was running through his mind—some idea that concerned the trees. He nodded to

himself. Whatever it was, he seemed to like it.

He swung back toward the bridge and started across. He had to step funny because of the awkward spacing of the ties. It made him look as if he were tip-toeing. She sensed that he didn't like it. She sensed that he didn't like all the naked air around him and the long fall to the gorge below.

A tramp, she thought. Was he here on a different day—a day last July when the summer heat lay on him like a dirty, sodden blanket? Who had he encountered that day? And more important, what had he done to them?

She was gasping for breath. She sensed Jeanne's spirit, cloistered like a nun and mute and yet somehow reaching out to her—whispering to her. And she sensed the aura of the man, too, now far out on the bridge, an aura that was basic and intimidating.

Something about this place is making me crazy, she thought. But maybe it was only the strain of the past summer stretching now to the breaking point.

She wanted to let go—right there in the trees. All summer she'd held it in, but there came a point when you wanted to let out a scream of anguish big enough to rend the wind.

But she didn't. Instead she calmed herself. Pushed the pack behind a tree. Slipped the pistol into a pocket. Slid down the bank of the cut again.

The man was no longer on the bridge. He'd disappeared into the trees on the other side. She forced herself to follow him. I don't know if he's the one, but if he is, maybe he'll lead me there, lead me—she made herself finish the thought—to the place where he buried them.

That much anyway. To know for sure they were gone—that it had happened to them—the thing that every parent feared. Death by violent hands. Death in absolute terror.

*"I'm here, Mother."* No, her mind playing tricks. Just the breeze. The wind through the gorge.

She crossed the rickety bridge. She began to understand the black man's fear because it clutched at her, too. It was so naked up there, each step so unsure. She paused a quarter of the way across and stretched out her hands and gripped a couple of uprights that stood on either side of the track. Then she went on. She arrived breathless on the other side. The track bed rose there, curving toward the ridge through an endless, steep-sided cut. It was getting to be twilight already—the dark coming on fast. And that man

somewhere ahead of her. The man with the huge hands.

I shouldn't have left my pack on the other side of the bridge, she thought. I'll have to go back for it, and do I really want to do that in the dark? She put the pack out of her mind and went on.

She had to walk on the tracks, the cut was so tight there was nowhere else. She rounded the next bend, the bridge dropping out of sight behind her. No sign of the man. No sign of anything but the curving track.

This is no good, she thought. I could walk right into him.

She needed a vantage point from which she could view more of the track. Through the trees to her left there seemed to be some sort of rock formation. She climbed the steep-sided bank, gripping weeds and roots, whatever came to hand. Then she had to descend into a briar-choked gulley and climb out the other side to get to the base of the formation.

It was a huge slab of grayish rock rising straight up toward the ridge. No way up except through a weed- and tree-choked chute along one side, and already her legs were a mass of cuts from the briars. But there was no way back either except through the gulley.

It took her fifteen minutes to get to a ledge that would take

her out on the face of the rock. She sat a moment with her knees drawn up, catching her breath. There was still light on the opposite ridge, but except where the river creamed whitely over the rocks, the gorge was a pit of gloom.

*"... nearer, Mother . . . only a few more yards . . ."*

She whipped her head up. "What?"

She must have dozed momentarily. Dreamed. Her heart beat like a triphammer, and not from the climb.

She got to her feet. Her leg muscles felt stiff and sore. She looked around and saw an easy way up the remainder of the rockface. A few minutes later she emerged on a much broader ledge with a path leading off it into the woods. She saw the entrance to a narrow cave under an overhang of rock and before it the remains of an old fire.

She shivered with emotion. They'd been in this place—Jeanne and the Alcott boy. She was sure of it. And if she searched diligently, maybe she'd find out what had happened to them.

Her eyes swung to the cave entrance under the overhang. You'd have to crawl to get through it, and the area beyond would be very dark. She had a flashlight clipped to her belt. She got it and flicked it on. Then

she reached for the pistol—and it was gone.

She searched the ledge, but she already knew it wasn't there. It'd be down below in the briars or somewhere in the chute she'd climbed.

She turned back toward the cave entrance. She was a little more nervous now, a bit more apprehensive. She took a deep, chuffing breath, then got down on her hands and knees. She squirmed through the cave entrance, the flashlight thrust out before her.

The cave made a sharp turn, and she had to shove with her feet to get around it, half afraid that she'd never get out again. Then the cave opened up, and she was able to stand.

The air was dank and moldy, and she didn't like breathing it—as if to take any of it into her lungs would contaminate them forever. She swung the flashlight beam around. She was in a small chamber, and it wasn't empty. Against the far wall sat a wooden box the size and shape of an army footlocker. And beside it on the floor an old trainman's signal lantern.

Somebody had told her something about those lanterns once—or maybe she'd read it—and now, inanelly, it came bubbling into her mind. How railway men used to leave them on the porches of houses of ill re-

pute near the railroad yards when they went inside to indulge themselves. And how this had eventually given birth to the term "red light district."

She shook the thought out of her head—foolish, foolish—and approached the footlocker. There was no lock on it. She put her fingers under the edge of the lid, hesitated a moment, and thrust it open. Then she reached for the flashlight, prepared for anything but what she actually found—a heavy, shin-length raincoat and a floppy-brimmed rainhat.

It was the type of gear you might expect a New England fisherman to wear in the teeth of a northeaster, something straight out of a Winslow Homer painting. But for what earthly reason had it been stored in this cave? All neatly folded, too—and nothing else in the footlocker. Not so much as a candle stub.

"... *Mother, run...*"

She whipped her head around. The cave was empty. Then in quick succession she heard two pistolshots. They came from outside the cave, muffled but unmistakable.

She squirmed back through the entrance, scraping her knees as she went. Somewhere beyond the ledge something was crashing through the undergrowth—crashing away.

She moved quickly to the edge

and peered over. She had a brief glimpse of a figure rolling broken-doll fashion into the briars. A large figure wearing torn Levi's and a work shirt. Then it disappeared into the gloom, and a moment later the crashing stopped.

A shoe scraped on the ledge behind her. She started to turn, and a darkness came down on her, a darkness in the form of a smelly woolen blanket. It covered her head and shoulders and upper torso, and strong arms followed it, embracing her and locking it in place. She struggled to get free, but she was off balance and whoever gripped her was stronger than she was. Down below, the only place visible, she could see the white leg of her assailant and a scuffed blue sneaker. He-it-whoever threw her down as you'd throw a calf at a rodeo. Her body hit the ledge, and then her head hit it, too, and an unmerciful darkness descended.

**S**he came out of it, went back in, came out again. The blanket still covered her head and upper body, only now it was held in place with a rope. Somewhere nearby a fire crackled. It was upwind of her, and the wood-smoke penetrated the blanket.

A voice said, "She give you any trouble?"

"Naw, she was easy. Earl, we gonna play the game now?"

The second voice was female—a teenage girl, she thought. And she thought something else: that she'd heard it before and quite recently.

"Hell, Letty, you know it ain't time yet. We don't play that game till midnight, and here the sun's barely set."

Letty. He'd called her Letty. And she'd called him Earl.

"What about the big one? He gonna run, too, Earl?"

"The big one's dead."

"Daid—oh my. Just like Maw."

"And look what I found in his wallet."

"Did you find money?"

"Some. But mainly I found this."

"What's that ole thing?"

"It's a police identification card, City of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It's expired now, but once upon a time that ole boy I shot was a police detective. What do you think of that?"

"Don't think nawthin'."

"That Alcott fellow must've hired him. Hired him to come down here and look for his son."

"Was his son one of our'n?"

"You remember him, Letty. He's the one came with the girl."

"Oh, him. He was *fast*, Earl. Fastes' we ever had. And when that girl stumbled, he didn't even stop to help her."

"He was terrified, Letty."

"Then I got her, got her good, one whack! Then I got him, but I had to come back and give him another one. That was two of them, Earl. Two in one game! I sure won that night."

"That was your best, Letty. I told you we'd have fun together once we got rid of your maw."

"Oh, we got us lots of fun now, Earl. All Maw wanted was to hide me somewhere. You think she was shamed of me, Earl?"

"Maybe."

"Shamed 'cause all the kids called me dummy and simple."

"Now, Letty."

"Them kids should see me now. They should see how ole Letty wins them games we play. Ole ugly Letty. Ain't any uglier than the rest of them. Ain't any dumber either."

The girl at the crossroads store—the big heavy girl with the squinting eyes. "She's simple," Suggins had told her. And he was the other one. Earl, her father. No, her stepfather—isn't that what he'd said?

And that black man—if only she'd spoken to him—if only she hadn't been *afraid*. And now she was helpless, and they were talking about how they'd killed her daughter and that boy Jack Alcott. How they'd even made a game of it.

Calm. Be calm, she told herself. They're not to get away

with it—not any of it. That's your mission for tonight—to somehow turn the tables on them.

She tried moving her legs. They weren't tied. She could run for it, then. Hide in the vast Southern woods. But not with this blanket tied over her head.

"Is it time yet, Earl?"

"Now, quit asking me, girl. I'll tell you when. We got to do this right. We got to do it according to the rules we made up."

"You the one made up the rules."

"Sure I did. But you like 'em, don't you? You win by 'em."

"I could win right now, Earl."

"No. The darker it gets, the spookier it gets. And that's what makes the game."

"Yeah. Oh yeah, Earl."

"So let's just wait. This one'll be a fine one." A hand suddenly slapped her leg, and her heart jolted. "She's got good legs. She'll make a race of it."

"She ain't *daid*, is she?"

"Hah. She's been wide awake and listening to us for ten minutes now."

Something suddenly stabbed her in the side. The point of a stick. She reacted with a muffled cry.

"Told you."

Hands grabbed the blanket where it came over her head. They yanked it to one side. Now she could see out with one eye.

See red-faced Earl Suggins leaning over her with a tight smile on his face. See the orange glow of the fire. See the girl sitting on the other side of it with bare white legs. She had something folded across her lap. It was the raincoat from the cave.

She stared at them without speaking. What could she have said anyway? Earl leaned closer.

"Where'd you leave your pack, Miz Whitaker?"

She kept her lips pressed together. He jabbed her with the stick.

"Other side of the bridge," she gasped. "Up in the trees."

"Thank you, we'll find it. Any money in it?"

"Some . . . traveler's checks. I could get you more. If you'd let me."

"Sure you could. But what makes you think we could take the chance? Them traveler's checks'll be fine. I can backdate them at the store."

He ran the point of the stick along her nose. She shut her eyes tight, afraid he'd jab her again. Then the stick went away.

Oh if she had the gun. Oh if she could empty it into his leer-ing face.

She opened her eyes again. He was back beside the fire.

"Why are you doing this?" she demanded.

"To you in particular or just



generally? Well, I can't rightly say. I've thought about it, though. I guess it's 'cause I always done stuff like this, it's in my blood. And now, in Letty here, I sort of got an instrument. And when you got an instrument, you use it. I'm not right upstairs, Miz Whitaker, that's what it amounts to. Or the world's not right, and I'm fixing it a corpse at a time."

He turned back toward the fire and sat there brooding. Maybe he was thinking about what she'd asked. Maybe he was trying to come up with a better answer.

Letty rubbed her thick hands together. "Is it time yet, Earl?"

"Dammit, Letty—"

"Is it time?"

He heaved his shoulders in a sigh. "Yeah, why not? Let's get it the hell over with."

Letty came up on her feet, a heavy, awkward teenager. She shook out the rubberized raincoat and stuck her arms through the sleeves. Then she jammed the hat down on her head. She looked ridiculous—like a child dressing up for a game. But wasn't that exactly what she was doing? Dressing for a game where she gave people terrible whacks?

She went trundling off into the darkness. Now Ruth was alone with Suggins, and she wasn't sure she liked that. For a

moment he remained sitting beside the fire, facing away from her. Then he turned, and there was a knife in his hand.

He moved toward her, and firelight ran along the blade in an oily sheen. She raised her legs to kick at him, but he dropped a knee across them to pin them, held her body down with one hand, and used the knife—but only to sever the rope that bound her in the blanket.

He stood up and backed off a couple of feet. Then he put away the knife and replaced it with a pistol.

He said, "We're gonna go someplace now, Miz Whitaker."

She got clumsily to her feet, shedding the blanket. Her head spun woozily a moment, then cleared. She saw that they were still on the ledge beside the cave. Suggins gestured toward the path that led off through the woods.

"That way," he said.

She had to pass him. He turned with her, always keeping the pistol pointed at her body, then fell in behind. There was just enough moonlight to see the path.

"W-What're you going to do with me?" she asked.

"I'm not gonna do anything. It's Letty that's the doer."

"Did you kill my daughter?"

"You don't want to know the answer to that, Miz Whitaker."

"What did you do with her body? At least tell me that much."

"When you get to the railroad track, step out in the middle of it and stop."

The trees and underbrush closed in on either side. It was like being in a tunnel. But up ahead she could see the tracks, and something was brilliantly lighting them.

All at once a voice whispered to her from the darkness of the trees—and this time it wasn't a phantom voice. "Miss Whitaker—run!"

Suggins uttered a shout, then two figures were scuffling on the trail behind her. But by that time she was already doing as the voice had bid—running crazily down the path toward the railroad tracks. A pistolshot sounded behind her—aimed or unaimed, she didn't know which—and she heard the passage of the projectile through the leaves over her head.

As she came off the path, she lost her footing and went sprawling across the tracks. The fall knocked the breath out of her, and she had to force herself to rise again. The full glare of the light was on her. She turned toward it and saw a single headlight. It was mounted on the front of one of those open utility cars that railway repair crews use, and behind it stood a figure

in a raincoat and a hat. It was Letty, and she had a long-handled axe in her hands.

The car—how had it come to be there? A relic from the old days—that was all she could think—somehow discovered by Earl and brought back to life. But that hardly mattered now. All that mattered was that she get out of there—*right now!* She turned and ran down the track. And behind her the engine of the utility car sprang to life—held a moment—died.

Get off the track! her mind screamed. Get off the track before she gets it started again. But she was deep in the steep-sided cut now, and the only way out lay ahead over the bridge.

She tried anyway. Tried to claw her way up the side of the cut. But it wasn't possible. And then she heard the engine catch and hold, and she knew she'd have to run. She dropped back down on the track and took off.

The headlight moved through the trees behind her, throwing crazy shadows into the night. She ran faster. The going was downhill so it should have been easy, but the awkwardly-spaced ties hindered her, they turned her leg muscles into mush.

Then the car came around the bend behind her. The headlight hit her—*bang!*—like that, and her heart went *thud* in her chest. Something halfway be-

tween a moan and a cry escaped her lips. She pumped her legs harder. Raced skitteringly around the next bend. Put *that* between her and the headlight. A momentary respite—but only momentary.

Her mouth gaped open. Her legs seemed not even to belong to her body any more. Her mind was a bright, burning flare of panic.

That getup Letty wears—the hat, the raincoat—it's to keep the gore off her when she scores with the axe or splatters you under the wheels of the car. My God, my God—to keep *my* gore off her!

The headlight hit her in the back of the head again, and she realized that Letty was playing with her—deliberately holding back so the game would last longer. Hideous child—did Earl make you that way or was it your nature from the beginning? Didn't matter. All that mattered was that she somehow survive.

She stumbled, caught herself just in time, raced on slightly unbalanced like a tightrope walker on the brink of disaster.

She rounded a last downhill bend and felt the wind from the gorge in her face. She was at the bridge—the terrible rickety bridge with nothing on either side of it but empty air. And at that precise moment she realized that that was where Letty

had been herding her all along. It was her killing ground, a high theater of death soon to be lit by a single headlight.

She rushed out on it, and all around her the air seemed to swirl and push. Her mouth was rough and dry. Her breath came in audible gasps. There was pain in her lungs and in her side. The ties had battered her feet and ankles, and her legs felt like lead. And yet she rushed across the chasm—rushed like a gazelle. But what came behind her was faster than a gazelle.

The headlight hit her again, throwing her shadow ahead of her across the narrow ribbon of the bridge. And this time it fastened. This time it locked and closed the distance.

The noise of the car's engine was loud in her ears. The trestles rattled beneath its weight. The rails between which she ran hummed with it.

She risked a glance over her shoulder. Letty loomed behind the headlight, a great dark ogre with a terrible axe held straight over her head.

She was three-quarters of the way across now, but the car was picking up speed. Soon it would drive into her legs, and as it did, the axe would slash downward, severing her neck.

She wanted to scream, but there was no breath for it. She

wanted to throw herself out of the way, even if that meant the gorge, but there was no time and no room.

The car was only a few feet away now. And the axe—the axe—it seemed to whistle in the wind behind her ears.

Letty gave out a ululating cry of triumph and ecstasy. “Aaaaaah . . .”

The headlight. The cry. *The terrible axe!*

And then—

A sudden stop to the cry.

Ruth summoned one last burst of energy. Her legs drove like pistons. She reached the end of the bridge. She threw herself into the undergrowth beside the track. The car flashed by—and it seemed to have no one in it! Then it swept blindly around the next bend and was gone.

She lay there gasping and sobbing and shaking in every limb. Slowly the normal sounds of night reasserted themselves. The rush of the river through the gorge. The creak of the autumn trees in the breeze.

A glint of light. She raised her head and saw a flashlight beam moving on the bridge. For a moment she thought—wildly—that it was the trainman’s ghost. Then she realized that it was something much worse—Earl Suggins. Whoever had jumped him in the woods had lost and lost fatally.

He paused halfway across the bridge. She heard his voice, faintly, on the breeze.

“Letty!”

The beam of the flashlight shot into the trees at her end of the bridge. She ducked her head, then raised it again as the beam returned to the bridge. It picked out something lying between the tracks and froze there. She raised herself some more and saw what it was. A bloody bundle sprawled across the ties. A bundle without a head.

Suggins dropped to his knees.

“Letty! Oh no!”

And that was when the bull’s-eye lantern appeared on the track behind him—an evil red eye that seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

He became aware of it as a man might become aware of a sudden chill. He stood up, leaving the flashlight beside the bundle. At first he refused to turn and face what lay behind him. Then he did turn and let out a gasp that could be heard across the gorge.

The bull’s-eye lantern swung lightly in the breeze.

Then a spectral hand, its fingers bunched in thick tendrils of black hair, raised something into the cold red light. The dead eyes stared, the mouth gaped obscenely, and there was a drip-drip-drip on the wooden ties. It was Letty’s severed head.

Suggins gave a cry. He stepped back, and his feet tangled in the bloody human bundle behind him. He started to fall and waved his arms wildly. But there was nothing for him to grab but empty air, nothing for a hundred feet or more.

His final shout echoed back and forth between the ridges. Then, like him, it was swallowed by the night.

**T**he big black man—his name was Briggs—sat on the other side of the fire. He was telling her about it, telling her about the parts she hadn't seen.

"He walked right on by the head—didn't even see it because his attention was focused on that body lying in the tracks. Well, he had a gun and I didn't, so I picked it up and shook it at him. Pretty grisly—and a pretty crazy risk, too—but it sure worked. And then it helped that I had that bull's-eye lantern of theirs."

"But Letty, how did she—"

"I came in by boat. We'll hike down to it as soon as it gets light. Anyway, there was some fishing gear in it, including a twenty pound trout line. I figured if I stretched it across the track and there really was a train up here—like those boys told me—then it'd break the line when it passed, and I'd

know for sure. At first I was going to rig it up between a couple of trees, then I spotted those uprights on the bridge and decided to use them instead. That was after I'd walked up the tracks a way and come back. Just as I finished, I spotted you climbing that rockface and figured I'd better find out who you were. And ran smack into Earl in the process."

"He said he'd killed you."

"When he fired, I ducked for cover and fell pretty hard. Then I played possum when he came down to check me out. Lucky for me he was only interested in my wallet. Later in the woods I tried to jump him so you could get free. But that sort of misfired, too."

"That trout line . . ."

"It was just high enough, Miss Whitaker. She was going full tilt when she hit it. It took her head clean off—not that I planned it that way."

"You saved my life, Briggs."

"Or something bigger than me saved your life. Let's just chalk it up to that."

"That crazy man and that wicked girl—why did they do all these terrible things? My daughter—" she shook her head "—she's gone now, I know it. I guess I've known it in my heart since last July."

Briggs gazed at her across the fire. "I lost a teenage boy in an

automobile accident. I won't lie to you—you never get over it. But you learn to live with it."

They lapsed into silence, and after awhile Briggs stretched out on his side of the fire. He was older than she'd thought—pushing sixty at least—and it had been a strenuous day and night.

She folded her arms over her knees and put her head down. She heard the crackle of the fire, smelled the woodsmoke. Then someone seemed to touch her

shoulder. Someone seemed to speak.

*"... It's all right, Mother. I'm at peace now. You be peaceful, too..."*

She jerked awake. Briggs was asleep on the other side of the fire, his knees drawn up, his face buried in his fisherman's cap. She'd never really cried, never let herself go since last July. But now at last she gave into it, sobbing without shame or control. And only the wind in the gorge heard her.

*(continued from page 4)*

returned to the city. Two volumes of folklore coauthored with Jane Yolen are forthcoming from Scholastic Press.

B. H. Schrier spent forty years as a chemical engineer, in the course of which he wrote lots of nonfiction. ("Since 1985 my work could not be published because it was classified by DOD.") He has also written a number of children's stories and travel articles and was honored last year by the U.S. Marine Corps, Okinawa, where he now lives, as Volunteer of the Year for his work as a storyteller for the Camp Foster library and

daycare center. He and his wife have sixteen grandchildren, eight apiece.

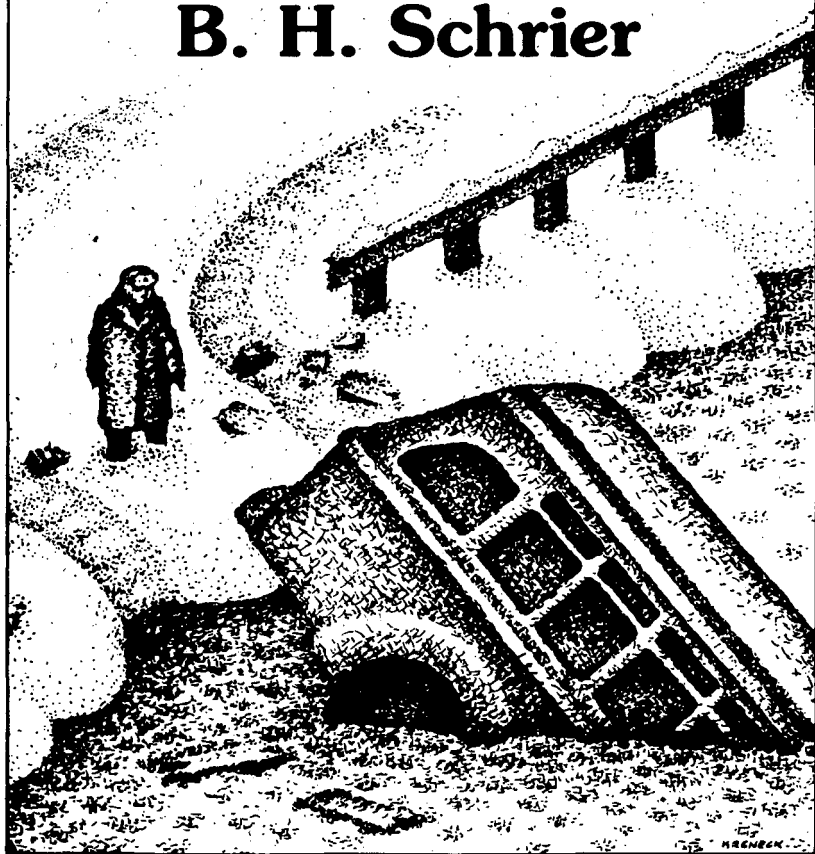
"My business career has enabled me to travel to five continents, exposed me to the highest levels of corporate life, allowed me to see the inside of our defense industry and made me privy to some of our nation's darkest secrets. I have worked with people of all races, all nations, and most of the world's religions, in both high-tech and basic survival conditions.

"And everywhere I went, I found that people love a good story."

FICTION

# **LIN PO AND THE DEADWALKER**

**B. H. Schrier**



*Illustration by Kevin Kreneck*

*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/96*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



---

A cold wind howled off the mountains, bringing whiskers of frost to the dead grass. Little heat came from the government's radiator, and Lin Po wore his sheepskin cap indoors. He lifted an earflap to answer the phone.

"Lin Po!" the voice of the chief inspector crackled. "Up in the hills a terrible accident has occurred. A bus left the road and fell in the river. You will be the investigator."

"Yes, chief inspector." He wondered why he must always be the one to travel far from home.

"Your orders and travel chits are coming by courier. You will leave on the first available bus." There followed a slurping sound as the chief sipped his tea. "And, Lin Po. At all times you will protect your government from scandal."

"Of course, chief inspector."

At the bus station he stood in line to read the latest newspaper from a copy that hung page by page on the wall. There was a brief report of the tragedy. In a storm of snow and sleet an unscheduled bus had careened down the mountain near the village of Lokow.

A schoolboy read the words aloud. "All passengers are presumed dead. The bus, on official business, carried an entire village of hill farmers being transferred to make room for the rising waters of a new hydroelectric power dam. Forty-four passengers are missing, and only the driver survived."

"Transferred!" sneered an old woman. "So that's how they put it! Torn from one's roots, one's ancestors. And now slaughtered, due to negligence!" Only then did she see Lin Po's uniform, and she slunk into the crowd.

Six hours later, his stomach grumbling, Lin Po was met by the mayor of Lokow.

"Not to worry, deputy inspector. We shall find all the missing ones." The mayor's smile exuded an oily happiness. "And you will be the honored guest in my humble house. We go now to the scene of the tragedy."

They rode in the mayor's truck, with Lin Po's bag on the seat between. "See? Here is a rice mill, driven by water wheel. These days we keep a wire fence across the spillway. Any bodies will surely be caught in the mesh."

At that moment three men were using long poles with hooks to drag a black bundle from the foaming water. By midafternoon, when the bus was winched up from the river, all the dead were accounted for. The forty-four bodies were laid out in a vacant warehouse.

Lin Po inspected the bus. Its floor was littered with soggy bundles and scattered baskets, many of these decorated with ribbons of red and gold. Pieces of fruit, very expensive at this time of year, rolled about on the floor, with many an empty wine bottle. It seemed the village of Boyang had been on a picnic.

He found the driver's window rolled down, and he cranked it easily up and down again. The brakes functioned normally, and the steering. He walked completely around the vehicle, looking at each tire, each headlamp. Above the rear bumper was an emergency exit. Its handles were tied together with twisted loops of heavy steel wire.

The bus driver, Cha, knew nothing of the wire. "It's not my regular bus, and it's far from new. The door latch must be broken."

"How is it you escaped alive and none other?"

Cha's eyes bulged larger than most. "They went crazy when the water poured in. I had to fight my way out of my window. See?" He pulled open his tunic. "I have many bruises, many scratches, where they clawed at me. And half of them were drunk, if you must know. They probably died in their sleep."

But Lin Po thought those injuries were what one would expect after jumping from a moving bus.

There followed a miserable night. The temperature dropped outside while Lin Po shivered in the mayor's bed. The wired emergency door bothered him. He had found nothing wrong with the latch.

Next morning the dead were frozen, as was their clothing, making the search for identity papers more difficult.

"I'm sorry," smiled the mayor. "There is no heat in the warehouse."

"Just as well," Lin Po said without smiling. He was studying the face of a young woman, a pretty face even in death. "This place would soon stink if it were summer."

Under her black tunic the young woman wore a new-looking red blouse. On one of her blued fingers he found a gold ring, a ring with no sign of wear.

"Comrade mayor! Isn't this a wedding ring?"

The mayor never ceased to smile. "Oh yes. In the style of the decadent West, but you know how young people are these days. They want everything Hollywood."

Later the mayor saw him walk up the hill toward Boyang. He was still there at twilight, shining his flashlight from one side of the road to the other.

Next morning Lin Po learned that the only telephone was in the mayor's office. He placed the call long before official office hours, to assure the chief inspector he was hard at work, and the mayor heard every word.

"Yes, chief inspector, all dead but the driver, who rests in what serves for a jail in this—place. Many of the dead were separated from their papers, and I have no passenger list. The difficult questions should now be asked. What shall be done with the bodies, and how shall we identify which go into which tomb? For these simple people surely adhered to the customs of their ancestors."

"Ah," slurped the chief inspector. "Questions of some delicacy, full of political inference. I rejoice that our respected Lin Po is at the site to make such decisions. You say that there is no one to be found at Boyang?"

"Nothing remains of Boyang, chief inspector. The valley was stripped of citizens and livestock. Buildings were burned. Tombs were opened and the bones moved to new tombs up the mountain. I have spoken with the Chief of Works, Engineer Tang."

"Lin Po, surely there are relatives who survive. Some must have married with those of other villages. Some must have gone to the cities."

"But which cities, which villages? Chief inspector, I will meet to-day with the elders of Lokow. Should you have an inspiration, please call at this number."

The elders arrived and were seated at the mayor's round table where they drank tea in silence, looking now and then at Lin Po from the edges of their eyes.

"The dead must be respected," smiled the mayor. "Someone must visit their tombs on the holy days, to make the traditional gifts that will keep misfortune from visiting the living."

There was hushed conversation until the youngest man made a suggestion. "We shall build them a common tomb near the site of the tragedy. And we, the people of Lokow, shall honor their memory on feast days."

An older man contested this. "I have consulted with a Sam Ku, one who speaks with the spirit world. She says the unfortunate people of Boyang were distressed enough, being separated from their homes. Now they are separated from their bodies as well." The others nodded in assent.

"They would much prefer to sleep with their ancestors. Even now these spirits wander blindly, lost in a strange place. Who knows

what ill such spirits might cause?" He made a sign to chase evil away.

Lin Po had to bite his tongue. How could such ignorance persist, four generations after the People's victory? "Even now the government builds them a tomb," he said, "on the mountain above Boyang. I myself spoke to those in charge."

The mayor's worry hid behind his eyes. "This is a good plan. The dead will return to Boyang, to a new tomb near the bones of their ancestors."

The oldest man shook his head. "But how will their spirits find the way back?"

Lin Po could not suppress a sigh. To these country folk there was no greater threat than an unhappy spirit wandering about, ready to cause trouble.

The mayor looked up with a smile. "We shall hire a Deadwalker, of course!" Now there were smiles all around the table, except on the face of Lin Po.

In a week's time all was accomplished. Engineer Tang and his crews had created a large tomb in record time, despite the weather. The bus was repaired and declared roadworthy. Lin Po watched as the unfortunate dead were respectfully laid in the bus, their papers properly stamped and pinned to their clothing.

"Bring the bus driver Cha to me," ordered Lin Po.

Cha wore shackles on wrist and ankle. His prominent eyes grew larger as he was dragged to the bus. Lin Po and the village elders waited beside the open door.

"Cha," said Lin Po, "you have been chosen to drive the people of Boyang to the tomb prepared for them."

"No!" he shouted, his eyes even larger.

"It is only fitting. You were the cause of this tragedy, and you should make an effort to atone for your deeds. You must think of this as a happy affair." Lin Po unrolled a bundle of red fabric. "Here is a nice costume you can wear which I found lying along the road."

It was a groom's traditional costume made of scarlet silk and trimmed with gold thread, very expensive.

"No need to be afraid," crooned Lin Po. "You can pretend you have just come from a wedding. See? Inside is one dressed as a bride. I am told by Engineer Tang that a wedding was held just before your bus left Boyang."

The body of the pretty young woman was propped up in the seat

just behind the driver. She now wore the full costume of a new bride, complete with white powdered face and rouged cheeks.

"No! Please!" Cha fell, trembling, to his knees.

"There's nothing to fear unless you deliberately caused this accident to cover your crimes. Nothing to fear unless you were the groom at a recent wedding in Boyang. Put him in the bus!"

Four sturdy peasants grabbed arms and legs and lifted the screaming, struggling Cha in the air. He fought like a crazy man, clutching the door, bracing his feet, and the four could not force him inside.

"Enough! Put him down." Lin Po grabbed him by the hair. "Are you the same bus driver Cha who married a woman in the capital?" Cha nodded and fell again to his knees.

"Perhaps you are also married to a woman in Dushan," he shouted, "a woman with child?"

Now Cha groveled on the frozen earth of the road. "Yes, yes. All true." His tears muddled his cheeks.

"How very clever, a wife at both ends of your route. You might never have been discovered." Lin Po hauled him to his feet. "But two women were not enough, you philanderer. You romanced this poor country girl as well. I suppose it was her family who insisted on an old fashioned wedding in the temple?"

Again Cha nodded, covering his face.

"Suddenly you were ordered to take the people of Boyang to Dushan. But that is where your wife and child live, where your bigamy was sure to be discovered. Was it for this you drove the bus into the river?"

Cha confessed before witnesses and was returned to his cell. Another driver came forward, and eventually the bus departed for what once was Boyang. Although he wouldn't witness such superstition, Lin Po knew the bus and driver were sent off after much folly involving priests and fortune tellers, for which the whole town turned out.

That afternoon a dried-up little man and his daughter arrived, and the mayor accompanied them to each household in the village with a stern warning.

"What nonsense!" Lin Po didn't join him but stayed indoors, writing his report. "The people of Lokow believe that this little man has power over a thing that isn't visible, isn't even there. How easily are peasants parted from their money."

Snow fluttered on the wind at sundown. At dinner the mayor did

---

not smile. "Listen, honored guest and beloved family. Tonight we will lock all doors and windows. No one may go outside. For the sake of your own spirit, do not even peek between the shutters. Only the Deadwalker can look upon these ghosts and not lose his soul."

Lin Po went to bed with his clothes on, the only way he had found to keep warm. He fell quickly into sleep, but in an hour he awoke. The house no longer creaked in the wind. The still air was full of the sweet sharp smell of new snow. Even geese and watchdogs were silent.

The hairs on his neck prickled. He heard them again. Footsteps. Heavy, weary footsteps, the feet of many people. Just footsteps, no sound of breathing, neither a cough nor a sneeze. Their march drew nearer because the mayor's house stood close against the road. There was no mistake. Such noises could not be caused by wind or cattle.

Lin Po tried to count them as they passed, but he could not. He was sure only that they came from the river and passed up the mountain.

His bus arrived at dawn, sounding its horn from a kilometer away. Lin Po made his goodbyes, and the mayor's door closed behind him. He was squinting into the snow-bright sunrise when he saw footprints in the new snow, many footprints of all sizes, all pointing in the same direction.

Up the mountain, toward Boyang.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

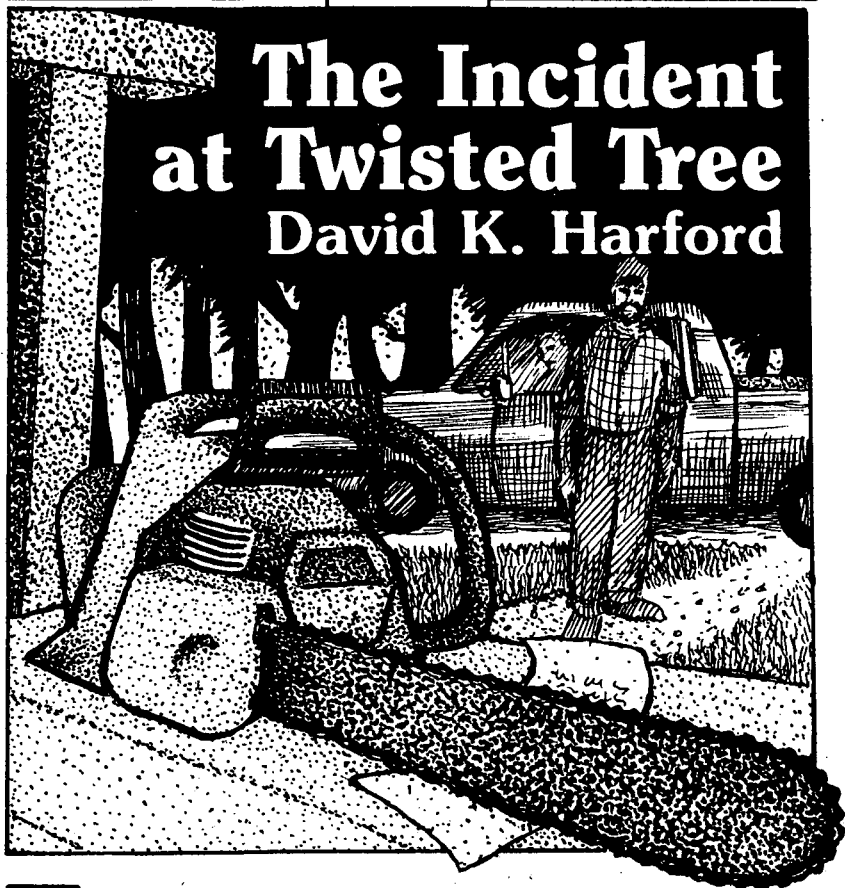
Gaudy night. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



# The Incident at Twisted Tree

David K. Harford



**T**he day after it happened, the *Bradford Era* referred to it as an “incident,” writing: “An incident occurred yesterday at an oil well site owned by Leo Bevy in the Twisted Tree area of McKean County. Reports are one man is dead. Police accounts were sketchy at presstime. The name of the victim was being withheld

pending notification of next of kin . . .”

For those of us who knew Mike Anderson, who grew up with him, went to school with him, drank too many beers with him, that “incident” soon mushroomed into a full-blown tragedy, consuming all of us like a toxic cloud. Later, as events unfolded, it just grew larger and

uglier and more twisted than the gnarled oak tree the area Mike was killed in was named after.

Mike's funeral had been "nice," as funerals go. Everyone said he looked good, but I don't know. To me he looked dead and much too young to be that way.

"You know," Longstreet said after a long, long while of saying nothing. We stood leaning against the railing of Mike Anderson's wood deck. We'd just returned from the cemetery, the final detail done. "I feel like someone has clear-cut my mind; gone through and just cut down everything in me. Laid me bare."

Longstreet was an independent logger, so it was natural for him to express in loggers' terms the emptiness I knew he was feeling.

Longstreet's wife was in the other room tending to Nancy, Mike Anderson's young widow. Nancy's kids were at their grandmother's. An eerie funeral parlor atmosphere still lingered in the house, thick and weighty as if it wanted to crush us.

"Did Nancy ever find out exactly what happened?" I was about the only one who had not heard all the particulars of Mike Anderson's death, being out of town most of the last week.

Longstreet scanned the horizon. "She said the police told her Mike was loading well casing onto Bevy's flatbed truck. I guess

either the chain or the boomer snapped as he was tightening the load down, and something flew around and smacked him upside his head. Then the load of pipe rolled off the truck and crushed him. She said he'd been terribly preoccupied the last few months, worried, she said, over money and the kids and was he saving enough for them. And what would happen to them if something happened to him. But I'd heard all that when he was working for me." Longstreet sucked in more air and blew it out softly. "He knew logging best. He should have stayed with it." And then he added, a bit more forcefully, "Damn him. I wish he'd stayed working for me." He jerked at his tie, loosened it, and slipped it off.

"He was going to call you the night before he was killed." Mary's soft voice came from inside the open patio doors behind us. We both turned at the same time, and Longstreet gave her one of his "what do you mean?" looks.

She stepped out onto the deck and stood between us. "I think you ought to see this," she whispered, reaching into the pocket of her dress. "Just look at all this." She pulled out a wad of cash thicker than a stash of girlie magazines at an all-boys' school.

"Nancy just showed this to me. She's sleeping right now, so let's

talk out here." Mary slid the glass door shut. "She said she found this money in a metal box in the garage. It's over five thousand dollars." She fanned some of it, tens and twenties mostly, old bills. "She doesn't know where it came from, or what to do with it. Bank it? Hold it?"

Longstreet scrutinized the wad of money.

"But she said that the night before Mike was killed he and that Bob Hammer guy were arguing loudly out on the drive—"

"Sledge?" Longstreet interrupted. "What was Sledge doing here? Mike hated Sledge."

"Sledge" was Bob Hammer's self-proclaimed moniker. Mike Anderson took it a step further and called him "Sludge," which fit Bob Hammer pretty good—better than Sledge did, actually.

"I don't know," Mary said, "but they were really going at it. Nancy said she could hear them arguing something about trees. Then Mike stomped in, picked up the phone, and started to dial our number. But he must have changed his mind because he slammed the phone down, drank a few more beers, sat there sulking for a while, and then went to bed."

"Sledge has a knack for riling people," Longstreet said, an understatement. "You say this argument happened the night be-

fore he was killed?" he asked Mary.

She nodded.

"I don't know why Sledge would be here. Mike thought Sledge was the biggest jerk in McKean County. Besides, Mike wasn't logging any more. He quit that when he quit me. Not enough money, he said. Too dangerous." A hint of bitter irony crept into his voice.

Sledge headed what he called the McKean County Independent Loggers' Association, an organization he started himself, an organization Longstreet never bothered joining. While quite a few of the other independents did join, Longstreet just didn't trust organizations, and he certainly didn't trust Sledge. Sledge was a guy who could go on a weeklong toot, tossing around organization dues to buy drinks so he could play a role. Not working, but playing a role. That's what Sledge did best.

"I don't know," Mary said. "But they were arguing over some trees, some oak trees. What should we do with all this money?" She lifted the wad of cash towards Longstreet.

"I'll put it in our safe," he said. "You going to stay here?"

"For a while. Nancy asked me to go through his stuff. Her mother's coming over later with the kids. She'll stay the night."

Longstreet stuffed the money

into his sports jacket pocket. "Let's get out of here," he said to me. "Funerals always have a funny kind of quiet about them. The silence is so loud here, I can hear the dead screaming. My place will be empty. We can talk better there. I'll reheat some venison stew in the micro."

But when we got to Westline, Longstreet's house was hardly what a guy would call empty. In fact, his driveway looked like it was the main meeting place for a convention of law enforcement officers, all from various agencies, men who were just then climbing out of several official government vehicles. We recognized the Pennsylvania State Police cruiser immediately and Corporal Kelly.

It wasn't until we stepped out of Longstreet's truck, though, that we recognized Pete Curry sliding out of the passenger seat of the National Forest Service vehicle. Curry, head of the Allegheny National Forest Service, had a driver with him, a man we knew well, Paul Dunlap. A fourth man, one we didn't recognize, dressed in a suit with a vest to match, paced nearby, frowning worse than the rest of them were frowning.

"You mean the U.S. Forest Service doesn't have anything better to do than to hang around my yard?" Longstreet asked the

group. I was glad to hear his sarcasm because it meant he was returning to his old aggressive self, was filling in that emptiness he'd spoken about earlier. "My tax dollars working for me," he said, scanning the group of state and federal officials one by one, not bothering to hide his disdain. "I'd think—"

A glum expression passed over Longstreet's face like a dark cloud when Bob "Sledge" Hammer ambled out of Longstreet's empty house and in gangly, cocky strides stepped down off Longstreet's porch. Sledge looked ridiculous in his coat and tie.

"Who told you you could go in there, Sledge? There's nothing in my house of interest to you." I don't know why Longstreet made fists with both his hands, but he did. With state trooper Kelly standing right there, there wasn't likely to be a fistfight. Probably just a natural reaction, the way a cat arches its back when confronted by something it doesn't like, something it instinctively doesn't trust.

"I was using your bathroom," Sledge said.

"Next time go over there by them trees. My dog does."

Pete Curry intervened. "You know everyone here?" he asked us both. He pointed at the state trooper. "You know Corporal Kelly of the Mount Jewett bar-

racks. This is his case we're looking into. You know Paul Dunlap. You obviously know Sledge. And of course, as you may know, this is Mr. Crabtree, the county's district attorney."

Longstreet and I looked Mr. Crabtree, the man in the vested suit, up and down. We'd both read his name in the *Bradford Era* occasionally, but neither of us had ever met the D.A. personally or professionally.

"And we're here, Longstreet," Curry said, "because we're looking into a recent rash of log thefts. The last one, the most recent we've found anyway, is about a mile down the road from that tract you bought the bid on from Lamberson & Oaks." The National Forest Service supervisor jammed his hands into his trouser pockets.

Longstreet started shaking his head back and forth slowly, then more vigorously. "Now, you're not going to accuse me of running down that road hijacking your logs, are you?" It was the second time in only a few minutes that Longstreet's hackles had been raised. Or maybe they'd been raised all along at his first sight of this group, and they just never lay back down.

"No, no," D.A. Crabtree said. "No, that's not why we're here." He placed his hands on his hips, pushing his jacket open. "We were meeting on this up at the

ranger station, and your name came up. Mostly because, well, this last log heist was near where you'll be cutting, and we were hoping you might have seen something. Plus it was said you hear about everything that goes on out in the woods. Since our little tour of the area brought us down here to Westline, we decided to stop in and touch base with you. We're hoping you can help us."

Longstreet drew in a long, low breath and rubbed the bone of his chin. I knew what he was thinking.

The Allegheny National Forest area, all half million acres of it, is reputed to have the best stand of black cherry trees in the world. With the price of timber the way it was—at a premium—one large cherry tree could net a guy quite a few hundred dollars; an entire logging-truck load of cherry trees could bring in thousands of dollars at a sawmill. With that kind of money literally growing on trees, it was no surprise unscrupulous loggers took advantage of the fact that none of the area's numerous sawmills ever asked where the logs they were buying came from; had no way of checking it out even if they did ask. The mills simply paid top price for however many board feet of whatever grade you hauled in. And most of it would

be pretty good grade, too—very, very valuable.

“Let me show you what we have,” Pete Curry said, reaching into his forestry truck for a folder.

While Dunlap pulled down the tailgate of the truck for a make-shift desk, it hit me why each particular man had been called into the meeting.

State policeman Kelly was there because a crime—probably grand larceny—had been committed. Sledge was there to represent all the independent loggers in the area, men who’d be the first to see something not quite right in the woods; men who had the most to lose, who’d be most interested in seeing any logjacking brought to a halt.

Recent newspaper articles explained why the D.A. was present. He’d been trying to formulate policy whereby sawmills would begin to ask questions and keep records of whom they paid and where the logs they purchased were cut. How this system would work had not been detailed yet, let alone put into action. But stealing timber had potential for becoming the crime of choice, so everyone agreed there was a dire need for more checks and balances in the loosely monitored lumbering industry—everyone except those profiting illegally from it.

I stepped up behind Long-

street and peered over his shoulder as Curry drew out some black and white eight by ten aerial photographs. He laid the first one on the tailgate for me and Longstreet to look at.

“This is the area near you, near that tract you bought. Right down the road, deep in this valley here, you can see where they took a good-sized load from right alongside the road.”

The glossy photo showed a heavily forested area below Kane near where Longstreet had bought a small tract from a friend who’d given up logging and left the area.

“Here’s another illegal cut over by the Kinzua Reservoir.” Pete Curry flipped a second photo down. “Again, they took only what they could reach beside the road.” Curry studied Longstreet’s face and mine for a reaction, then he proceeded. “Another one above Red Bridge; this one here,” he flipped a third photo, “was taken near Warren.” He spread the photos out in his hands like a poker player fans his cards. “In all, about five illegal cuts that we spotted from the chopper. I don’t need to tell you that that’s five truckloads; could be fifty grand or more over several months.”

I knew enough about logging to know how stealing timber could be easily worked. A crew of guys pulls up to some remote

location, cuts down just one load of quality, high-grade timber, and hauls it off to a sawmill, where they're paid top buck. Because they'd be in a hurry, they'd just cut what they could near the road—a good crew could load a truck in a couple of hours. But there was a lot of risk in doing it that way.

Suddenly all those government men in Longstreet's driveway started doing what government men do best when they're in a pinch—they all started talking. I half expected to see committees being formed.

"We're going to begin stopping log trucks on the highway," Corporal Kelly was saying, "hoping we can start keeping track of who's cutting where, checking loads, weights, trucks, and all that. We'll be making an all-out, concerted effort."

"That won't do any good, I told you," Sledge said. "You might as well try to grab a handful of wind."

Sledge's trucks weren't in very good shape, state inspection-wise, so it was natural he'd try to discourage this tactic if he could. With great reluctance Longstreet agreed with Sledge, but for a different reason. "He's right. A cherry log looks like a cherry log, no matter where it was cut from."

"That's why we're going to ask the mills to start keeping rec-

ords, too," D.A. Crabtree said.

"I don't want to pop your bubble, but what happens if some guy has a small tract of timber to clear," Longstreet said, and by the unevenness in his voice I knew he was becoming a little irritated with these guys. "Let's say he sneaks over one day off his tract and steals a couple of loads from you, Curry, or from anyone, from state land or private land. The sawmill asks to see proof of where he got the logs, and he tells them the location of the tract of timber he's legitimately cutting. Who's to say he didn't get those logs off that tract?"

"Well, we have to start somewhere sometime," Crabtree said. "We were hoping you could give us some ideas."

"The one idea I'm getting is that all you guys are antsy because you've just discovered the extent of what seems to have been going on for some time, and you're all trying to cover your own butts; scurrying around you are, trying the close the barn door after the cows got out. That's the idea I'm getting. I wish I could help, but I don't know what you could do. Seems by those photos you took that the damage has already been done."

"We want to stop future thefts," Curry said.

"That's your job, not mine.



Keep your gates locked." Longstreet directed this at Curry and Dunlap.

Most of the national forest roads could be gated and padlocked, but certain designated roads were left open because of the forestry's multi-use policy. Hunters, tourists, walkers, skiers, mountain bikers, snowmobilers all used U.S. Forest Service roads throughout most of the year.

"These roads *were* locked," Curry said. "Show him the locks, Dunlap."

Dunlap reached into his vehicle and pulled out half a dozen padlocks. All appeared to have been cut with something, probably a bolt cutter. "This is what they leave us with," Dunlap said.

Dunlap was the forester people contacted when they needed information about tracts of timber the U.S. Forest Service might have coming up for bid. And he was one of the rangers you got the key from if you needed to go down one of the forestry roads. All of which explained why *he* was at that meeting.

"I don't know what to tell you. Seems risky and brazen as hell, cutting the locks like that. You'd think someone in the forestry service would notice cut locks on the gates. Or they'd hear saws running." Longstreet shifted his weight from one foot to the other, anxious. It was no secret that

he had about as much love and patience for government agencies and their men as he did for a bad case of head lice. I watched him eyeball each of them—Curry, Dunlap, Corporal Kelly, D.A. Crabtree—until he finally settled on Sledge. I wasn't surprised when he suddenly put an end to their meeting, adjourning it pronto.

"Now, if you guys don't mind," Longstreet told the group, "me and my friend have just buried our friend today, and we have some personal things to talk about and we'd like to do it now. Alone. So why don't all of you just hop in your government cars and government trucks and get your government problems off my private property. And take this piece of crap with you." Longstreet jabbed a stiff finger right in Sledge's face.

Oh, Longstreet was back to being nearly his normal self all right, really filling in the emptiness now. But perhaps because Mike Anderson's death was still too near to him, he had a bit too much haste and anger mixed in there. It's not unusual for anger to flourish like a weed in a mind freshly furrowed by grief.

With hardly any of them saying anything more, the group dispersed to their respective vehicles, some of them shaking their heads, glancing sideways at Longstreet. Only Sledge

spoke up, and it was probably the only honest statement Bob "The Sledge" Hammer made all day. He spoke to the district attorney. "Told you you would get no cooperation out of him. Told you, didn't I? Told you he's a crazy son-of-a-b—"

"Sledge," Longstreet interrupted. "What were you and Mike Anderson arguing about last week right before he was killed?"

Sledge turned all six feet of his muscular frame around and squared off with Longstreet, who was a few inches taller. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I haven't spoke with Mike Anderson in a coon's age."

"His wife says she heard you two arguing outside Mike's house. Something about some trees."

Sledge pushed his hat back. "With all respects to Nancy, she's mistaken. Must have been someone else she heard."

Much later, as I lay recuperating in the Bradford Hospital, I remember thinking it was at this point here in Longstreet's yard that Mike's death not only took an unexpected turn but began branching out in odd, twisted directions.

**"S**o I told Nancy I'd wash Mike's clothes and take them to the Goodwill in Bradford," Mary

told Longstreet and me. She set a plastic clothes basket on the kitchen floor. "There's some more garbage bags full of laundry out in the car."

We'd just eaten fresh-kill venison stew Longstreet had heated in the microwave. Outside, the June evening was growing dark.

Mary looked drawn and sagging; her blonde hair hung in limp, lifeless strands beside her face.

She sat down at the kitchen table with us, took a long swig of beer out of the bottle, and peeled the bottle label off, lost in her thoughts for quite a while. Then she raised her face and said directly to Longstreet as if I weren't there, "You know, honey, I was thinking today, you can make me happy. You can even make me cry. I don't care. But don't you ever, ever make me a widow. I could never go through what Nancy's going through right now."

Longstreet reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

"I feel so numb," she said. After another long swig she added, "Nancy said to tell you she thought Mike would want you to have his chain saw and his tools. She's got no use for them. They're in her garage on his workbench."

"I'll stop in tomorrow evening then," Longstreet said. "How's she set for money, besides that

cash I put in the safe? Enough insurance?"

Mary pushed back from the table, rose, and began pulling Mike's dirty laundry from the basket, sorting it to load in her washer. "Luckily she's in pretty good shape. He had two policies plus a small one Bevy carried on him. There was a mortgage insurance policy, so the house'll be paid off." Mary lifted a shirt out of the basket, shook it, crumpled it up in her hands, and threw it into the colored-clothes pile.

"While I'm up there tomorrow, I'll see what I can do for her around the house," Longstreet said. He pulled three more bottles of beer out of the fridge, opened them, and handed one to Mary and one to me. He took a drink out of the third.

"I'll tell you one thing you can do," Mary said. "While I was there, I noticed Mike hadn't cut his firewood yet. It'll be winter before we want it. He's got a load of pole wood—"

"He hadn't cut that yet? I took that load to him, what, six months ago, right before he quit me and went with Bevy." Longstreet furrowed his brows, genuinely perplexed.

"He didn't have time, Nancy said. He'd been working overtime, daylight to dark, on Bevy's leases for the last few months." From the laundry basket Mary pulled out a pair of jeans and

shook them hard so the leggings would come out.

I spoke up. "I'll get Feldman and Smitty. We'll haul Smitty's wood splitter up and make short work of it."

"Get Dempsy, too," Longstreet said. "He might not be good for much else, but he's good for lugging and stacking anyway. We'll do it this weekend. Funny—"

Mary swore out loud, a long exasperated string of vicious expletive-deleteds that stopped Longstreet in mid-sentence and had him looking at his wife.

I looked over, too, at what she was scowling at, and I saw the cause of her colorful language. A sizable pile of sawdust and wood chips thrown from a chain saw and obviously caught in the pockets and cuffs of Mike Anderson's jeans lay in a mess all over the kitchen floor. Sawdust and wood chips on a logger's floor are not an uncommon sight, and Mary had probably cleaned up Longstreet's plenty of times. But this mess seemed to be one more thing gone wrong in a long, tiring day for Mary. She swore again and turned toward a small closet where the vacuum cleaner was kept, but Longstreet beat her to it. "I'll get it," he said. "Why don't you sit down, drink a beer, and relax a bit. I'll heat you some venison stew." He nudged her towards the kitchen table. "You've been working all day."

She cast him a funny sort of look as if she hadn't heard him quite right. In fact, I was looking at him kind of funny, too. Longstreet vacuuming the floor? Heating her dinner? What was next? Dishes? Making the beds? Dusting furniture?

Sitting down, Mary offered no argument. I stood to leave. Just as Longstreet was about to sweep up the sawdust and wood chips, he stopped and scooped up some of it and sniffed at it. Then he crumbled it between his fingers, looking real puzzled about the stuff.

I told him I wanted to ride up to Nancy's with him the next day in case there was something that needed doing, maybe something heavy needing to be moved that Longstreet couldn't handle alone. As I stepped out onto their porch, I could hear Mary and Longstreet talking.

"I was thinking at Mike's how bare everything was. Inside me, I mean." He spoke slower than usual, in a softer voice, as if he were struggling to choose the right words. "And I realized that sometimes, well, I guess I just don't tell you enough how much I appreciate you marrying me. Putting up with me. I guess I realized I don't tell you enough times how much I love you and that I'd miss you bad if something were to happen to you."

I knew Mary was probably

choking back tears because Longstreet was no more a guy for love words than he was for doing dishes or making beds. But there isn't a wife in the world who doesn't like hearing them, and when the words were as sincere and spontaneous as Longstreet's were, it was doubly nice for her—to have them words wrapped around her tired heart like a warm, snugly blanket.

I heard a chair scrape along the floor, being pushed back from the table. I figured Mary had just risen to embrace her husband. "You don't have to tell me," she said. "I know you do. I know you love me. I don't need to hear it. What I need right now is for you to *show* me. Right now I need to *feel* it. More than anything else I need to feel *something*."

The kitchen lights went out suddenly, and as I stepped from the porch to cut across Longstreet's lawn heading for my place, the upstairs bedroom area went dark and then the whole house was dark, as though it had just been swallowed up in a long, dark tunnel.

**T**he dim light of evening was creeping up on us by the time Longstreet and I left Nancy Anderson's the next day, and Longstreet was putting the

pedal to the metal of his truck.

We made two I thought dangerous passes on the curvy, hilly highways between Kane and Bradford, and I wanted to say to him, "Hey, pal, we'll find Mike's chain saw. But if you don't slow down and we pile up, we'll be asking him personally where he put it."

"If I don't get that saw now, that goddamn Bevy will claim it's his," Longstreet said like he'd just read my mind. "Or it'll just 'disappear.' What the hell, Mike's dead, someone's apt to say. He won't need this four hundred dollar Stihl chain saw. His widow won't even know it's missing. It's my saw now."

"Why do you think it's at Bevy's?" I braced my hand on the dash as if that would keep me safe when we smacked head-on with some semi barreling down a hill.

"Where else would it be? Bevy could have had some trees to clear off a lease or a road to cut or maybe just a blowdown across the road, so Mike took his saw to work. The saw's not in his garage. You saw that. He didn't lend it to anyone, for sure."

That last was true. I knew men, and Mike Anderson was one of them, who'd sooner lend out their wives than their chain saws.

"So it's got to be here." Longstreet whipped his truck into

Leo Bevy's pipe yard a few miles outside Bradford on Route 219.

Tucked back off the road a ways, the oilman's yard was organized into sections that held well casings in one corner, oil jacks in another, scrap iron in another. A small dozer sat loaded on a lowboy near a pile of sucker rods, and there was a backhoe nearby, all sitting off to the left of the larger of two sheet metal buildings. Leo Bevy's dusty truck was parked in front of the smaller building. His was the only vehicle there.

"What makes you think I'd have Anderson's saw?" Leo Bevy looked up from his bookwork while Longstreet and I stood in front of his desk. No one else was in any of the other offices, and our voices echoed a bit in the nearly empty building.

Leo Bevy, tall, lean, and dressed in oil-grimed work-clothes, was the son of Jeremiah Bevy, original oil and gas pioneer—old oil money as people like Jeremiah were known. After his dad died, Leo took over managing the hundreds of oil wells left to him by his father, and for a while he made a dandy, comfortable living. Leo's only son Josh, about our age, worked the numerous oil leases with his father.

But now both men were struggling to make a buck pumping good quality Pennsylvania crude

oil and natural gas. In the 1990's the Pennsylvania oil business was just a shadow of what it had been in the 1890's when the oil boom was on.

Not that all the oil was all pumped out, mind you. No, sir. No. What helped shut down the local oil business was government interference, either with tougher environmental regulations that drove up the cost of production, or with new government regulations, each with its own fee, all driving up costs and making foreign oil cheaper for refineries to buy.

This long, continual downhill slide in the oil industry was reflected on Leo Bevy's face. The age lines running down his cheeks seemed darker, longer, and deeper than I remembered them being, age lines running across his skin like hash marks on the sleeve of an old soldier's uniform meant to show how many years he had in service. How many hard years he had put in.

"I thought maybe you had Mike doing some cutting for you around one of your leases," Longstreet explained.

"Cutting? Cutting?" Leo Bevy closed his ledger with a heavy thud. "Cutting," he repeated, drawing out a cigar, offering one to me and Longstreet, which we refused. He lit his and watched the smoke, like his life's work,

drift upwards and dissipate into nothing. "The only cutting I'm doing around here is cutting production because oil today sells at fourteen dollars a barrel and it costs me fifteen to get it out. I'm cutting man hours and staff size. I'm cutting out luxuries at home. I'm doing a lot of cutting, Longstreet, but it ain't the kind of cutting you're talking about."

"You mind if I look around?" Longstreet asked. "In and around that other building? Maybe Mike brought it to work, and you didn't know it."

Bevy glanced sideways out the dust-streaked window towards the large equipment building sitting about dead center of his five acre pipe yard. Directly behind the yard and that building, down over a sloping area, a healthy stand of hemlock and white pine stood on Bevy's land near where it butted up against some state forestry land. "Of course I mind, Longstreet. I'm telling you I don't have Mike Anderson's saw. This is the only saw we have." Bevy waved his hand across the field office room at an older model McCulloch chain saw on the floor near some metal filing cabinets. Longstreet moved towards it to look at it more closely. "If we need anything cut, we use that."

Longstreet turned the saw

sideways so he could see the chain and bar better. I watched him run his finger along the bar.

"Satisfied?" Leo Bevy asked.

"I'd still like to take a look-see."

"You're a persistent son-of-a-pup. I told you, I don't have it, haven't seen it. I haven't got the key to that building anyway. Josh has it, so you couldn't get in if I was to let you." He half-rose out of his chair, leaning across his desk, trying to stare Longstreet down.

Then Bevy's expression went blank like he'd just had a distant afterthought, and I honestly believed he was going to pitch a ring of keys at Longstreet and tell him to go try the equipment building for himself if he wanted to. Most of his important equipment and tools were stored in that building, and it just didn't seem likely that the owner of an operation as big as Bevy Oil & Gas wouldn't have a key to his own building on him, or hanging on the wall where I saw a bunch of other keys.

But Bevy didn't produce any keys. Instead he spoke in a calmer voice, one deepened with concern. "How's *your* business doing, Longstreet? How's the logging industry doing?"

"Making money. Not lounging in the lap of luxury, mind you, but making some."

"You're going to bid on that

Hansel Lake Project the forestry's got coming out, I heard."

"Thinking about it," Longstreet said.

"Well, good for you. Bid it. Bid them all. Expand. Grow. I'd advise you to make hay when the sun shines, son." He settled back into his chair and laid his arms across his closed ledger, fiddling nervously with the book's tattered cover.

Longstreet glanced out the window towards the other building.

"Look at me, Longstreet," Bevy said in an even but gruff voice. "Look at me, son."

Longstreet swung his attention around to the older man.

"I'm your future. So look at me and listen. Make your living now while you can."

"I don't understand."

"You don't?" Bevy leaned forward wearily. "Then I'll give it to you straight because I like you. I like what I see in you. Beware of the tree-hugging, owl-kissing environmentalists. You see one spotted owl in this area, you'd best shoot it. That's my advice to you."

Longstreet shifted from one foot to the other but offered no comment.

So Bevy went on. "Let them find just one fieldmouse, a mouse on the endangered species list, and believe me, you'll have them tree-hugging greens screaming



their fool heads off, blocking your roads, driving nails into your trees, and what's worse our lawmakers and people like the EPA and Pennsylvania's DER and even the forestry, who's making money off all the cutting that's going on around here, will desert you and start listening to them environmentalists, wanting to appease all them angry votes. Next thing you know, they'll either shut you and all the other loggers down altogether or you'll be like me where they've just made it so costly to operate, it's not worth it to be in business. The state and federal agencies have cost me bundles. They haven't got anything else to do but dream up ways to put me out of business. They've stolen my son's future and mine. It wasn't supposed to be like this, but I'm seriously considering closing the books on this whole operation and selling my leases. So I'm giving you free advice. Make your money now, but be prepared to jump ship at the first sign of a storm brewing."

What used to be our area's flagship industry, the oil industry, an old workhorse employing thousands, was now just a rotting carcass of its former self. It was the main reason large local refineries like Kendall Oil had recently sold all *their* leases—just too expensive and too troublesome to get oil out of the

ground, in spite of lots of folks across the country screaming their heads off that we should become less dependent on foreign oil, screaming their heads off about the trade deficit, too. And some oilmen claimed that even the local refineries were in cahoots with one another in an effort to keep prices down.

So, like a small stone lodged in your shoe, there was something uncomfortable in what Bevy was telling Longstreet, and I could tell by how he was still shifting nervously from one foot to the other that Longstreet, too, knew that what Bevy was saying was more true than not.

"I appreciate the advice," Longstreet said.

"Then do yourself a favor and heed it." Bevy scowled down at his ledger, crushed out his cigar, and added, "They've stripped me clean." He slipped his reading glasses back on. "Now, if you two don't mind, I've got to go over these profit and loss statements. The good news is it only takes me half as long to go over the books these days. I've only got the losses to go through. Don't have any profit to speak of any more."

Just as we were turning to leave, Leo Bevy spoke to us one more time. "And I'm sorry about your friend, Longstreet. Mike Anderson was a nice kid. I liked

what I saw in him. I doubt I will, but if I find his saw, I'll see that you get it."

"What happened out there? With Mike, I mean?" Longstreet asked. Bevy stared down at his desk and spoke at it. "I was pulling wells and cleaning up some of my leases at Twisted Tree. The DER has been after me for some time to clean them up. Mike was helping me load the casings and everything else. I went down over an embankment for a moment or two to check a well site there. When I got back, the load had already shifted on him, and by the time I could get a piece of equipment big enough to lift that pipe off him, he was dead."

"Wasn't no one else around, was there?" Longstreet asked.

"No," Bevy said directly to Longstreet.

"Not Sledge?"

That caught me completely by surprise, as it must have Bevy.

"Sledge? What would Sledge be doing out on my leases?"

"Just wondering," Longstreet said and he turned to leave, giving Bevy's chain saw one last long look.

"What do you think of Bevy's warning?" I asked Longstreet.

We'd stopped to fill up with gas before heading to wherever it was we were heading.

"Well, in a lot of ways he's

right. The more laws, the more regulations agencies like the DER and EPA dream up, the more secure *their* jobs are, but the more jobs they cost us. But what Bevy didn't say was that actually the woods and streams *are* a lot cleaner than they were. The oil industry needed something done to it. They wouldn't police themselves. But I know what Bevy's feeling. Them agencies just don't know when to stop. They've got absolutely no common sense and are about as business friendly as a bear with feeding cubs is friendly. So Bevy's a little wrong in some ways, but he's a lot right, too."

After we pulled out of the gas station, Longstreet sat hunched over the steering wheel, thinking. "You know, though," he said finally, "something that ain't right keeps tickling me." At a much slower speed, almost leisurely, we were heading away from Westline. "And I can't quite reach it to scratch."

"About what?" I asked.

"About Bevy." He sighed heavily. "About Mike Anderson."

"I got the feeling Bevy didn't want us looking in that building. You can't tell me the key wasn't hanging on that wall."

"You notice that, too? But what's getting me is that Nancy said Mike had been working a lot of overtime the last few months. But Bevy said he's been

laying off, cutting hours. Those wood chips and that sawdust that fell out of Mike's pants cuffs were fresh cut, no more than last week, I'd guess. But when I looked at Bevy's saw, it was clean as a whistle, hadn't been used in months."

"He did say he hadn't been doing any cutting," I said.

Longstreet steered around a truck. "Yeah. And that's what keeps tickling me. Where was Mike cutting recently, if not for Bevy? Not his own firewood. We know that. Was he working somewhere else for someone on the side? And where's Mike's chain saw now if Bevy ain't got it?"

Longstreet had more questions than answers. And they continued.

"And what about Sledge? What was Sledge and Mike arguing about, and why'd Sledge deny the argument even took place?"

"Maybe Nancy was mistaken. Maybe it wasn't Sledge she heard."

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe. And maybe not."

"Why'd you ask Bevy if Sledge was out at Twisted Tree when Mike was killed?"

"I don't know why I asked that. It seems unlikely that Mike would have much to do with Sledge. Yet there they are, arguing late at night hot and

heavy. Then Mike was going to call me about something. I guess I was figuring maybe the argument continued on into the next day. Maybe Sledge went out to where Mike was working—I don't know. I don't know why I asked it."

I did. Longstreet had an overactive imagination.

When we pulled onto a backwoods dirt road that cut a swath through the density of the Allegheny National Forest, I knew where we were heading—out to the small tract of high-grade timber Longstreet had just purchased from Lamberson and Oaks, the one he was going to finish clearing because Larry Oaks had gone to Arizona.

"It's funny how I got this job here," Longstreet said as we neared the tract of timber.

We drew up to a closed forestry gate, one of those with a cut lock. The forestry hadn't gotten around to putting a new lock on it yet, so I swung the iron gate open easily.

"Old Larry Oaks comes to me and says he can't finish clearing this tract and that he was getting out of the lumber business altogether. His mother was sick in Arizona, he said. But he seemed more scared and nervous than anything, like someone had the goods on him or was foreclosing on him and he wanted out of the area as fast

as he could with as much money as he could get hold of. He asked if I'd be interested in buying his contract. He even had logs already cut, he said, stacked and ready to be hauled to the mill. That was easy money for me. But he bid this tract high, a lot higher than I would have if I'd been bidding. And I'm thinking I might get into it."

"That Hansel Lake Project Bevy mentioned?"

"Yeah. That's a big, big project. Biggest tract the forestry's put out to bid yet. All high grade. Two million dollars maybe."

"Can you bid that?"

"I can now. Thanks to Mary's parents. They got money. That's how I paid Oaks. Mary's dad said if I wanted to expand my business, get out of just logging and get into actually bidding some of this timber, buying it, cutting it, and selling it, that they'd back me financially. I mean, you've got to have finances to pay Curry. The forestry isn't going to let just any jobbie step in with a ridiculously high bid just to get the job, only to find out he can't finish it because the price of timber falls and he goes broke. But anybody can bid who has a good track record and finances. On the other hand, there's going to be some big boys bidding that Hansel Lake job. Some of them I cut for.

I doubt I'll get it. And I don't even know yet if I want it."

"Why's that?"

"I don't want to be owing her parents, and I love cutting." I grunted, acknowledging that, because I knew it was true.

"I love being out in the woods, working in them. I love the smell of pine and fresh-cut logs and the earthy smell of fresh dirt turned over whenever we cut a road. I love the cold mornings and the hot days. The smell of fuel oil. The sounds of saws cutting and the skidder running. I'm afraid if I expand I'll have to get away from all that. I just love the work too much."

I knew there were people—those owl-kissing tree huggers Leo Bevy was warning us about—who wouldn't understand what Longstreet had just expressed; that people like Longstreet know and appreciate the environment better than they do because his whole life and livelihood came from the ground. Many folks who oppose logging—even hunting and fishing for that matter—don't even live in this area. They're from Delaware or New Jersey or D.C., where a tree isn't a way of life, it's a novelty, something to save. It's those people none of us have a whole lot of time for. We just want to yell at them, "Hey, stay down in your area and take care of your own problems. We'll take

care of ours." They'd never understand Longstreet.

We drove beyond the fresh-cut logging road that led in to where Longstreet would skid his logs out on the tract. About a mile farther, deep in that heavily forested valley where it got so dark we had to turn the high beams on, we came to the place Curry had photographed, where the logjacks had stolen a truckload of timber from the U.S. Forest Service.

"I just wanted to see this," Longstreet said.

From the truck we scanned the high side of the hill alongside the road. I was looking at the cut treetops and branches trimmed from the cherry trees and left in the road by the logjacks. Already the leaves were browning, withering and dying. Longstreet was counting and visually measuring the tree stumps.

"They took ten good-sized trees. A truckload," he said.

He went over to look at the ground for tiremarks, but too much time had passed and a recent rain had washed them away. "One guy felling the trees across the road. One trimming and taking the tops off. One picking them up and putting them on the truck. Three hours. With a good crew, maybe two hours. Down here in this valley with no one around, unlikely someone would hear the saws."

He took off his baseball cap. "But still, it was bold," he said. "Very bold. Real confident they wouldn't be caught."

We left and headed back to his newly purchased tract.

"The forestry doesn't do much clear-cutting any more, do they?" I said.

"No. It's almost all select cutting. There was a time back in the 1800's when a lot of this whole area was clear-cut. A lot of pine back then. Now it's almost all black cherry. Takes about eighty years for a forest to grow back in."

"Someone from the forestry goes in and marks the trees they want cut, is that it?"

"Dunlap does most of that. He'll spray-paint the trees to be cut and estimate how many board feet of what grade there is in a tract. Then you bid however high you need to go to get the bid without going broke cutting it. As much as I don't agree with them sometimes, I've got to admit the U.S. Forest Service around here does a good job managing their trees."

We bounced around on the fresh-cut logging road.

"I'll start this job next week," Longstreet said as we turned up a sharp switchback. "I still can't understand Larry Oaks' getting out as quick as he did, selling everything. I mean, he's still responsible to the forestry for this

bid. I can't lose. I—I'll be a son-of-a—" Longstreet jammed the truck to a halt, and I looked to the left where he had put his high beams on three or four small cherry logs lying scattered on the ground beside the road.

"Maybe I *can* lose. When I came out here with Larry to look this tract over a couple of weeks ago, there were almost a dozen logs in that pile ready for me to haul to the mill."

"Maybe Larry took a load before he left the area."

"Oh no. By the time I came out here, he'd already sold all his trucks. No. More likely whoever stole those trees back there saw this load of cherry, shot down here, and helped themselves to *my* logs. Someone's pocketing a lot of money." Longstreet glared at the few remaining logs for the longest time. Then he swore. "Whoever's been stealing logs is going to wish to God he never stole them from me."

**S**itting on the sofa in her living room, she held onto her two kids tight, drawing them both in to her like she feared if she let go she'd lose one of her children, too.

She was an awfully pretty girl, I always thought. Willowy, with straight black hair and a full, tanned face. Deep, dark black eyes. When she laughed—

and it was good to hear Nancy laugh—I immediately thought of a tree sprouting buds of new growth in spring. Nancy Anderson was a strong girl, strong enough to weather this storm; strong enough to come to terms with her husband's death and to know there was nothing she could do but go on. So there was a refreshing quality to her laughter, like a warm gust of spring wind after a hard, cold winter, when Longstreet asked her to repeat what she'd heard about oak trees during Sledge and Mike's argument.

"It wasn't oak trees," Nancy said, and it was here she laughed lightly. "Mary misunderstood me. But then I suppose I probably wasn't very clear. They were arguing over Oaks' trees. You know, Larry Oaks, the lumberman. But I couldn't hear exactly what they said."

Longstreet looked over at me as I looked over at him.

"You sure it was Sledge?" Longstreet said. "You know him?"

"Oh yeah, I know him. I know him as Bob Hammer. We went to school together. Mike called him Sludge. I remember a while back, when Mike and I were having some problems, Bob Hammer kept hitting on me every time he'd see me in a bar. I never told Mike. Mike would have knocked him into next

week if he'd known. Yes, without a doubt, it was Bob Hammer who was arguing with my husband about Larry Oaks' trees."

"And you don't know where that cash came from?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly and rubbed her face in her son's hair, thinking; then she tickled the little tyke. "I have all his pay stubs from Bevy Oil & Gas. Deposit slips at the bank match those paychecks. Unless he took a loan out. But I don't know why he would, and if he did, why put the money in a metal box in the garage?"

"Could it be he was cutting for someone on the side—you know, moonlighting a bit? That might explain the extra money."

"He was cutting somewhere," she said. "I know that. He had wood chips in his hair and down his back when he'd come home late some nights. Not every night. I just assumed he was cutting for Bevy. He never mentioned cutting for anyone else. In fact, he never talked about doing any cutting at all."

"Mike Anderson would not steal from me," Longstreet said, and I wasn't sure if it was me or himself he was trying to convince as we motored down the highway towards Westline.

"We're not sure he did," I told him.

"No. But it sure doesn't look

good for him. I mean it would explain the extra cash, needing to hide it. It would explain what their argument was about—Larry Oaks' trees. My trees now. Stolen. And boy, don't that sound like Sledge all over? As hard a time as he's having getting work, I can see him slipping away, cutting a few locks, lifting a few loads of prime timber. I just can't see Mike doing business with Sledge in the first place. Legal or illegal."

To an untrained, unobserving eye the lush summer mountains that make up the Alleghenies in our region would look simply green. But if those same folks looked close, most would notice all the numerous shades of green there are on our hills. A dark green, a light green, a lime green; greens from leafy trees; dark, nearly black, greens of pines. And then, as the shadows and sunlight shifted, even more shades of green emerged. I was appreciating the various colors, watching the shadows creep down over the hills as the sun set behind them, when Longstreet suddenly said, "There's Sledge now."

I looked out the windshield. Two semis were right in front of us, but sure enough, I spotted Sledge's bright orange logging truck ahead of us, rolling empty along Route 219.

"What's he doing out so late?



Taking a little ride in his truck?" Longstreet checked his watch, then flashed his high beams on and off to signal the two semis that he wanted to pass. "And who's that in there with him?"

No way could I see who the passenger in Sledge's truck was. "You say Sledge's not cutting anywhere that you know of?" I asked. I was thinking that even though it was getting late—in a half hour it would be dark—Sledge could be returning from a run to a local mill after selling a load of logs and was taking his empty truck back to whatever tract of timber he was cutting on. From there he'd take his pickup home. Or he was taking his truck in for repairs somewhere. He wasn't heading home in his empty logging truck. We both knew that Sledge lived in the opposite direction on the other side of the county.

"Sledge? Like I said, he's having a tough time. I think that's why he started that organization. To cover the fact he's got no work because no one wants him cutting for them. No one trusts him. That way he can tell people the reason he's not cutting is he's too busy running the organization. But if he's cutting private land for someone, I haven't heard about it. And I haven't seen him at any of the mills."

We started up a long hill and Longstreet, unable to pass both

semis at once, had to downshift and creep behind the trucks. Ahead, Sledge was putting distance between him and us, and soon he was out of sight, down over the break of the next hill.

"Let's see where he's going," Longstreet said. Impatiently he geared down, flashed his high beams again, and swung out into the passing lane, across the double lines. With the engine roaring in the reduced gear, he darted (dangerously, I might add) around the two semis.

When we reached the crest of another hill where we could see a couple of miles ahead up the next mountain, we both saw at once that Sledge had disappeared.

"He wasn't going that fast." Longstreet slowed his truck and started looking left and right. "He must of turned off on one of these dirt roads. Hell, this is all national forest land through here. He's not cutting anywhere in here."

"Maybe he is," I said. "And maybe he just forgot to go through some formalities, like bidding and getting the forestry's permission to cut."

Longstreet spoke out of the side of his mouth. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. It wouldn't surprise me one bit."

"And Mike Anderson? Would Mike do it?"

Longstreet's face soured.

Slowly he nodded. "If he could make money and was sure he wouldn't get caught, yes," he said. "But he wouldn't steal from me. If he was working with Sledge stealing logs, though, they sure picked a risky way to do it. And being loggers, they'd both know that."

We pulled off onto the berm and waited for the semis to pass us again; then Longstreet made a U-turn on the highway, and we headed back, hoping to spot where Sledge must have turned off onto a secondary road.

We found it about a mile back.

A hundred yards down the dirt road we spied Sledge's logging truck parked with its running lights on in front of an open forestry gate. Streams of vapor poured from his exhaust pipes; nearby we could see the forms of two men talking in the path of the headlights of a car parked directly behind Sledge's truck.

"Hand me my field glasses under the seat," Longstreet said.

I uncased them and handed them to him. He rolled his window down, and from the berm of the highway where we sat parked quite a ways away, he put the glasses on the two men.

"Now, isn't that interesting," Longstreet said, the glasses still pressed against his eyes. "Take a look, and tell me who you think Sledge has been driving

around with so late, way out here in the woods."

I peered through the glasses, recognized the other man, Sledge's passenger, immediately. "That's young Josh Bevy."

"Leo Bevy's son. It sure is."

Then a third man got out of the cream-colored car parked behind Sledge's truck.

"Take a look at this." I handed the glasses back to Longstreet. I didn't have to see any more to know what was coming down out on that lonely stretch of logging road. I wanted Longstreet to see it, too. I wanted him to witness Josh Bevy, under the cover of the woods and the night, handing the third guy a white envelope and the unknown third guy handing something I couldn't see to Josh.

"I can't tell who that is." He handed the glasses back to me and scribbled something on a scrap of paper from his dash. "Could it be old man Bevy? What kind of car does Leo Bevy drive? I mean, that is his son there."

"I don't know. Come on, come on," I said. "Move over, Sledge." Sledge was standing right in the way of whoever he and Josh Bevy were meeting with. "Can't see from here," I said.

"Sledge is out of uniform. He isn't wearing his tie and coat. He's got workclothes on." Then

Longstreet added more seriously, "Regardless of who that guy is, you can bet that ain't no ethics class convening over there."

Watching the exchange, I couldn't have agreed with that more.

After the meeting, Sledge and Josh Bevy climbed into Sledge's truck and backed out onto the highway following the cream-colored car, and both vehicles headed into Bradford.

There was really only one more surprise for us that night. When we got to Longstreet's house, before we even got out of the truck, we could see it sitting on Longstreet's porch—Mike Anderson's chain saw.

A note was attached to the saw. "Remember what I told you, Longstreet," the note said. "I'm your future."

**W**hen Longstreet called me the next night and said there was someplace we needed to go, he said it in such a way that I just knew we weren't going grocery shopping.

I walked through his house to a small room he'd turned into an office. A wall-sized map of the Allegheny National Forest hung on one wall right behind where Longstreet stood talking on the

phone. He shuffled some papers I couldn't see because they were behind his computer monitor. Longstreet had never gotten the hang of using a computer. His fingers were too big for the keys, he said. But Mary used it a lot. I'd watched her running it the day before, going over all the figures for Longstreet's bid on the Hansel Lake Project. She had faxed this info to her parents down in the Carolinas.

"Okay, I'll be here, Kelly," Longstreet said into the phone. "I've just got to know whose car that is out in my driveway so I don't go out and flatten all four tires on a car belonging to a friend of mine."

I looked out the window towards Longstreet's driveway. There'd been no other car parked there when I pulled in.

He hung the phone up and rubbed his ear. "I've been on this phone all day," he said.

"Was that Corporal Kelly you were just talking to?" I asked.

He picked up a slip of paper, and I recognized it as the scrap of paper he'd pulled off his truck dash and written something on the night before. "I told Kelly I had a cream-colored car, license plate number—" he read the number off the paper—"parked blocking my drive. He's running it through his computer."

"So who else have you been talking to?"

"Every logger I know. Every sawmill within fifty miles of here."

"And?"

"And Sledge ain't cutting anywhere. Nowhere. For no one. Period. He hasn't hauled as much as a twig to any of the mills around here."

"So what's that prove?"

Longstreet sat behind his desk. "That if he's stealing timber he could be stockpiling the logs somewhere, waiting for a right time to start taking them to a mill. They do have a shelf life, you know. But I can't figure out what he'd be waiting for."

I thought it might not be a bad time to pull on the reins of Longstreet's runaway imagination: I could still hear him telling me we were going someplace I wasn't sure I wanted to go. "We don't even know if Sledge is up to anything at all. Period."

"No. You're right. We do not. But him and Mike Anderson were heard arguing about Larry Oaks' logs, my logs now, and they've suddenly turned up stolen. Right near where we know one load was taken off the national forest. Like something rattling in the brush, it's enough to prick your ears up, don't you think?"

I was about to say, "Circumstantial evidence," when the phone rang and Longstreet grabbed it. I heard: "Yeah, Smit-

ty. Okay. You think they'll be there a while? Well, go in and buy them a few drinks. Keep them there. We'll need some time. If they leave and start heading for us, get ahead of them and give us a warning. Yes, I'll pay you for what you spend when I see you later." He hung up. "Cheap so-and-so."

"What do you have cooking?" I asked, ever so reluctantly.

"I just needed to know where Sledge and young Josh Bevy are, so I sent Smitty out looking for them. They're at J.J.'s in Bradford drinking it up. Smitty will keep them occupied until we're done. He said Sledge is spending money like it, well, like it grows on trees."

"Could be his organization's money he's spending." But then I felt compelled to add, "Until we're done with what?"

"With what we have to do—with our breaking and entering at Bevy's, into that building he seemed reluctant to let us go into."

"Ahhhhh, Jesus, Longstreet—" But before I could ask him why Leo Bevy, and remind him that breaking and entering was a crime, punishable by a few years, the phone rang again.

"Oh yeah? I appreciate that, Kelly. Thanks." Longstreet frowned at the phone. "I'm glad I called. I wouldn't want to flatten *his* tires. I'll take care of it."

Longstreet hung up and sat there for a long, long time just staring into the dead computer screen. He pushed his Hansel Lake bid sheets and figurings to one side, then glanced down at the recent copy of the *Bradford Era* that was lying open on his desk with his other papers. Finally he raised his head and said, "Guess who that car belonged to that was meeting with Sledge and Josh last night."

"I haven't the foggiest idea." I didn't, either.

"Paul Dunlap."

I have to admit that set me back on my heels a bit. "Curry's Paul Dunlap? Dunlap the forester?"

"Dunlap the forester. Dunlap would know which roads would be best to steal off of. Dunlap the forester, with access to keys. He might be giving Sledge keys to forestry gates. Still say there isn't anything going on? I wonder what Curry would have to say about *that* little meeting." He stared at the screen some more as if there was a puzzle etched on it and he was trying to figure it out. Finally he pushed back in the chair and said, "Let's go check out Bevy's building."

"Why Bevy? You keep returning to Bevy."

"One, because Mike was working for Bevy. Two, Mike was paid five thousand dollars for logs that haven't even been sold

yet. Neither Sledge, Josh Bevy, nor Dunlap has that kind of money. Leo Bevy's oil business may be souring, but he's not broke by any stretch of the imagination. And Bevy brought Mike's saw back."

"How do you know Bevy ain't there right now?"

"Because he's right here." He poked his finger at the newspaper in front of him.

I read the heading upside down: PENNSYLVANIA OIL AND GAS PRODUCERS MEETING TONIGHT IN WARREN. Warren was twenty-five miles away.

"Bevy's president of that group," Longstreet said as I followed him out to his truck.

All the way from Westline to Bevy's pipe yard it was near nonstop figuring things out, trying to make puzzle pieces fit, sometimes trying to make them fit in places that seemed to make no sense.

"If I were an oilman and I needed to hire someone," Longstreet said as we zipped north along Route 219, "would I hire a logger? Especially today with the oil business declining, there's hundreds of good, experienced, laid-off oil hands to choose from. Unless of course it was logging I wanted done. You see, I never had a clear bead on why Mike left me in the first place. He was a logger, not an

oilfield hand, and oilfield work doesn't pay a whole lot more than logging does. But if Bevy promised him big money for stolen logs—"

He let that thought trail off, then continued with another.

"Bevy hurt himself bringing that saw back," Longstreet said. "It just proves Mike was doing some cutting for him or why would Mike's saw be around where Bevy could find it? It's just that Bevy didn't know we knew about the wood chips and that Mike had been cutting and that Larry Oaks' logs were stolen. If he had known, he'd never have brought it back, probably."

A thought occurred to me. "Well, speaking of cutting, if Dunlap is giving Sledge keys to forestry gates like you think so he can steal some timber, why were all those locks cut? If they have a key, they wouldn't need to cut locks." I was hoping this would make enough sense to Longstreet, punch a big enough hole right smack dab in his thinking, so he'd reconsider what we were about to do.

But no good. "That bothered me, too, for a moment, I'll admit," he said. "Maybe Sledge cuts the locks after he's done to cover up the fact that he had a key—to cover up Dunlap's involvement. They unlock a gate, drive in, lock the gate behind

them. If someone comes along, he sees the gate is locked. It's when they're done stealing the timber that they cut the locks. Cuts down some of the risks of being caught that way."

He steered into Bevy's yard. "But you've hit a point: knowing what we do now, that Dunlap is involved somehow, I can think of all sorts of other ways they could steal timber, a lot more timber, with a lot less risk. So I keep asking myself, why are they doing things the way they are? Why take undue risks if you've got Dunlap in your pocket? That's what I can't figure."

We pulled up alongside the large metal equipment building. A set of vapor lights lit most of the area. Longstreet hopped into the back of his pickup and opened the toolbox built into the truck bed. "We're just going to do a little of Corporal Kelly's work for him is all," Longstreet said.

When he opened the toolbox, I could see that Mike Anderson's chain saw was in there. "I don't want to be a wet blanket," I said, "but I think Kelly would have a search warrant to do this."

"I've got a search warrant," Longstreet said. "These." And he produced a pair of long-handled bolt cutters. "I like to think of these as my Westline search warrants." He hopped back to

the ground and headed straight for the huge sliding doors. "We aren't going to steal anything," he said. "If there's nothing in here, we'll leave. And no one's the wiser."

"What do you expect to find?"

"I don't know. But I know this, I'm not going to have my livelihood jeopardized because Sledge, Bevy, and company are stealing timber. So I've got good reason to take a look-see."

He fitted the cutters around the lock, snipping it effortlessly.

I helped him slide one door wide open.

"We'll just—my, my, my. Will you looky there."

You couldn't miss it. "You were right," I told him.

"You're damn right I was right." A trace of a contented smile crept over Longstreet's face. "But I never expected this. This is too much. This is why Bevy didn't want us snooping around."

We found ourselves standing only a couple of feet from the grille of Sledge's bright orange logging truck parked inside Bevy's building. Hidden in there it was, backed in there, sitting like some kind of metallic sleeping monster, loaded to the hilt with fresh-cut cherry logs, some measuring four, maybe five, feet across at the butt.

"That's ten or twelve thousand dollars you're looking at right

there," Longstreet said. He moved around the side of the truck, still carrying the bolt cutters. I watched him walk the length of it, running his free hand along a log, inspecting the load of cherry. From the rear of the truck he said, "These are fresh cut. Probably last night."

"Let's call Kelly up at the barracks."

"Not yet," Longstreet said. He flipped through some papers on an old wooden desk set up near the back of the building. "I want to look around first."

"For what? Here it is." I laid my hand on Sledge's truck.

"For this." He waved a large business envelope at me. "That answers that," he said, tossing the envelope back onto the desk. "Let's go see if they're stockpiling logs here."

Longstreet tossed the bolt cutters into the back of his truck, and we went around the outside of the building, heading for the grove of white pine and hemlock growing down the slope behind the equipment building.

When we reached the rim of the slope, we peered down through the pines, through the dim illumination created by the vapor lights, to where the ground leveled off. We didn't have to peer very far.

"My God," Longstreet said.

All I could do was look and shake my head in disbelief, but



"My God" summed it up pretty good.

Cut to truck-size length and strewn on the ground, hidden in among the pines, lay what looked to me like a half dozen more loads of cherry logs about the same size as the load already on Sledge's truck. "What do you think of that?" I finally managed to say.

"What do I think? I think eighty thousand, maybe more. Hidden pretty good, too, but not stacked very safely," Longstreet said as if he were critiquing a piece of art. "They're just thrown around. Sure looks like Sledge's sloppy work. I'd hate to be working in that mess of logs. Someone was in a hurry. Someone's been busy."

"And someone's been a busybody." The gravelly voice came from behind us, harsh and grating.

Longstreet and I turned, and I wished we'd invited Corporal Kelly to join us in our little foray. It was the large-bore revolver Leo Bevy was pointing straight at me and Longstreet that made me wish that.

"Good thing I left my meeting early. Good thing I decided to see if Josh and Sledge got that last load out," Leo Bevy said. "Now what am I going to do with you two?"

"I'll guess you'll have to kill

us," Longstreet said. "You'll have no choice."

Sometimes Longstreet's blunt appraisal of things can be most irritating, and I saw this as, well, as a bad time to start challenging someone, especially someone who's pointing a pistol right in your face. Tact and social graces seemed more in order, but diplomacy never was Longstreet's strong suit.

"You can join us," Bevy said.

"You'd have to explain a few things to me first," Longstreet told him. "And even then, I don't know. This ain't my style."

"Don't be a Puritan. There's money here, Longstreet. I look at it as a way to get back the money the government stole from me. These are all national forest logs here, government logs. Not one of these trees was cut off private land."

The oilman seemed pleased with this distinction, like he envisioned himself as some kind of Robin Hood.

"How'd you get Dunlap in your pocket?" Longstreet asked.

"That weasel." Bevy laughed a bitter laugh. "I caught him. Caught him red-handed one night marking extra trees for Larry Oaks."

"Larry Oaks?" Longstreet couldn't contain his surprise.

"Larry Oaks, yes. Haven't you ever wondered why Oaks just suddenly sold out so quickly?"

"The thought never really occurred to me," Longstreet lied.

"He was scared, that's why. After Oaks bid and got that tract you eventually bought, Dunlap, whose job it is to mark the trees to be cut, went through and marked a bunch more. That's all free money Oaks and Dunlap were splitting. No one except Dunlap is going to check how many trees come out of a certain tract. That's his job. When I found out, it was a win-win situation. I went to Dunlap and told that lowlife federal weasel I wanted him to do the same for me or I'd turn him in. And believe me, Longstreet, I really didn't care what the weasel's answer was. That's when Oaks split."

"And it's the Hansel Lake Project you're going to bid," Longstreet said.

"You know that, too? Christ. You knew about Dunlap. You're observant, I'll say that. You've come far. I like that."

"We saw Dunlap last night, and I saw your bid sheet in there on that desk."

"Oaks found out I knew what was going on, so he got out. I got Dunlap. Having Dunlap with us, I can bid that Hansel Lake Project high. I can outbid everyone because as we get to clearing each section Dunlap will go through and mark us some extra trees to cut, trees not figured

in on the original bid—all hidden money."

"That's the way to do it," Longstreet said.

Bevy seemed encouraged that Longstreet agreed he was going about his thievery in the best way. "I need another man. Someone of your caliber, Longstreet."

Bevy lowered the pistol a bit, but he was still too far away for either of us to make a move for him.

"Before I give you my answer, I need to know something else," Longstreet said. "Why this?" He made a sweeping gesture with his hand to indicate the pile of stolen timber down in among the pines. "Why take the risk Sledge would be caught down one of those roads? Why risk ruining it all?"

Bevy sighed. "I think if I've made one mistake it was hiring Sledge. Sledge wanted to make damn sure Dunlap didn't turn us in. Stealing the logs that way, with Dunlap picking the roads, providing keys, and then keeping an eye on the gate while the crew went down to cut, helped assure Sledge that Dunlap was a bonafide worm. I told Sledge to do only half a dozen loads. No more. We can mix these logs in when we start clearing the Hansel Lake job."

"That's what's here? Six loads?"

"Well, actually seven. Sledge got stupid." Bevy raised the pistol a bit. "Are you in with me?"

I wanted to ask him how much he was paying an hour, but Longstreet started down over the slope towards the logs. I followed, and then came Bevy. (It was at this point, Longstreet told me later as he signed my leg cast in the hospital, that he had to lead Bevy down to that log pile. It was the only weapon he saw he had.)

Longstreet spoke as he neared the poorly stacked pile of cherry logs. "I want to see what grade these logs are. If we're going to steal, no sense stealing low-grade stuff. If you're going to hang as a sheep, you might as well hang as a ram."

Longstreet stood with his hand resting about head high on the butt of a cherry log. The logs were stacked dangerously and carelessly in a loose pile, some sticking out at odd angles. I was near the log pile, too, and when I saw Longstreet gripping that log's bark as hard as he could to get a firm grasp on it, I realized what he was going to do. But I couldn't move fast for fear Bevy would shoot me, thinking I was trying to escape or trying to jump him.

"What did you mean when you said Sledge got stupid?" Longstreet asked.

"He took some logs he wasn't

supposed to take. That set Mike Anderson off, and I guess there was some kind of set-to over it."

Longstreet nodded, and I could see his jaw muscles twitching and rippling beneath his skin, like he was wanting to scream out something and it was all he could do to hold it in. Instead he said, "These are pretty good grade. Are the ones up in the building this good?" He motioned with his head towards the equipment building.

The split-second Bevy turned his head in the direction Longstreet was looking, Longstreet pulled down hard on the cherry log his hand was on, putting his full weight into it and yelling, "Damn you, Bevy!" I suddenly realized that the other end of the log was just barely holding up five or six larger ones, and it didn't take much of a nudge to set them all free. In a sudden clatter that sounded like two-ton Pick-up Sticks suddenly falling and rolling all over, the heaviest logs toppled and bounced off the top of the pile towards Bevy and myself. Longstreet jumped back out of the way.

I was in a bad, bad position and couldn't get out of the way fast enough. The first rolling log caught me across the thigh, pinning me against another log. With a loud snap I heard my legbone break like it was a piece

of dry kindling wood, and then searing, bone-deep pain shot through me.

Bevy was caught offguard, too. By the time he saw about four logs rolling right at him, it was too late for him. When the heavy thud of loose logs hitting and rolling on top of one another (and on top of us) quieted, there I was pinned at the waist, pain shooting through my leg like a thousand hot needles.

Bevy didn't fare as well. One log caught him full length across the chest so that he ended up lying on his back on the ground, the butt end of a large cherry log resting up under his chin. From where I was pinned, I could see his ankle was smashed and twisted at an angle it wasn't made for.

Longstreet ran over and tried to lift the heavy log off me. He couldn't even get his arms around it.

"My leg's broke," I told him.

Bevy groaned under the weight of the log that kept him pinned.

"We better not move you, then. I'll call an ambulance." Longstreet hustled up the incline towards the equipment building.

When he returned, he carried Mike Anderson's chain saw. "Ambulance is on the way," he said to me. Thinking he was going to cut me free, I was sur-

prised when he walked over to Bevy.

Longstreet stood over the oilman, chain saw in hand, legs spread about shoulder width as he glared down at him. "Tell me about Mike Anderson's death, Bevy," he said in a voice so casual it was frightening.

It was the one topic not yet discussed, and I could see by Longstreet's intensity that he was wanting to discuss it bad.

Bevy rolled his head sideways away from Longstreet. Blood was pouring out of his mouth.

"Look at me, Bevy," Longstreet said roughly. "Look at me." He pulled the starter rope on the chain saw, and it roared to life. Longstreet revved it several times to get the cold engine running smoothly, and then he let it idle. "Look at me, Bevy," he repeated.

Bevy's head moved slowly towards Longstreet. It must have hurt him to move because he winced with pain. The butt of the log was pushing his chin back.

"I'm your future," Longstreet said, and with his finger on the trigger of the chain saw he revved it good and loud.

"Tell me about Mike Anderson's death," Longstreet said.

Bevy's lips quivered.

Longstreet set the saw on the log and revved it to a roar again. Like a hot knife through butter,

that saw went a good six inches into the wood above Bevy's throat. "I'll take your head right off," Longstreet said. "Talk to me."

I don't know whether Bevy was dazed or stupid, but he said nothing.

Longstreet revved the saw again and applied a downward pressure. Those razor sharp chain-saw teeth dug in deep, biting wood, cutting through the log another six inches. Wood chips were flying and sticking in the blood around Bevy's mouth. That's how close the saw blade was to his face. "Tell me about Anderson. Tell me about his accident." Longstreet's patience was gone. He had a crazy glint in his eyes, and the veins on his arms and neck were swollen and hard as black pipe.

He got himself set, grimaced, and again cut down through the log. By now that chain saw was only a couple of inches from Bevy's Adam's apple. "Tell me about Anderson," he repeated, hard.

Just as I was ready to shout, "No, Longstreet," Bevy must have realized Longstreet just might let that saw slice through the rest of the log and then through the soft flesh of his throat, through the gristle and bone of his neck, because he said hoarsely, "Mike wanted out."

Longstreet didn't pull the saw

out of the cut, but he did take his finger off the trigger and let the saw idle a few inches above Bevy's throat.

"He came to me out at Twist-  
ed Tree and said he wanted out," Bevy continued. "He didn't like what we were doing; he didn't like working with Sledge. I didn't know there was that much bad blood between Sledge and Mike. But when Sledge stole your logs, Longstreet, that was the final straw for Mike."

"So then what happened?" Longstreet asked. "After he told you he wanted out?"

"We argued. He said he was afraid we'd all get caught. He was afraid of going to jail. Afraid of what might happen to his family, he said. I told him he was in too deep now to be changing his mind. That he was no different than Dunlap. He charged me. He charged *me*, Longstreet, and I was holding a length of chain. I hit him with it. I didn't think I hit him that hard. Self-defense, Longstreet. It was self-defense. He just went crazy. He came at me."

Longstreet made a move like he was going to cut through the last little bit of log, just for spite. "When you rolled the pile of pipe off the truck on him while he was down on the ground, was that self-defense?

Was he alive when you did that?"

"I don't know," Bevy said. "I don't know if he was or wasn't."

In the distance we heard the siren wailing on the approaching ambulance. Up near the equipment building Corporal Kelly, called to the scene by the ambulance crew, suddenly whipped into the pipe yard, the lights on his patrol car flashing, and then his headlights were shining down on us.

Longstreet let Bevy lie there and came over to me to cut the log that had me pinned. Just having the pressure and weight of that log off my leg relieved about half the pain.

**L**ongstreet leaned the shovel against his truck. He finally had all the holes dug, and sweat was streaming off his face and down his neck. Mary flipped down the tailgate. "That cast must be uncomfortable in this heat," he said to me.

While the mid-July afternoon was hot and the humidity so close it was hard to catch a breath and I could feel sweat rolling down my leg inside the cast, tickling me where I couldn't scratch, I told Longstreet truthfully, "Well, it's a tad heavy and hot, but it's not nearly as uncomfortable as a casket would have been."

The three of us were parked alongside the land below where Longstreet had been cutting, near the site Mike had helped Sledge and Josh steal timber from.

"You read in the *Bradford Era* this morning what D.A. Crabtree had to say?" Longstreet spoke as he and Mary unloaded the first of twenty-five red and white oak saplings from the back of Longstreet's truck. Longstreet and Mary and Nancy Anderson had chipped in to buy the saplings from a forestry-approved nursery.

"Well," I said, "he is up for election in November. Sounded like it, didn't it?"

Leo and Josh Bevy, Sledge, and Dunlap were all sitting in the McKean County jail, charged by the state police with a variety of crimes ranging from grand larceny, aiding and abetting in a murder, and murder one for Leo Bevy.

The article we were referring to was Crabtree's statement to the effect that the arrests and pending trials of these men was a shining example of various government agencies' working together in a cooperative effort to bring to justice those who would engage in stealing valuable timber. Let this serve as a warning to others, he stated. Acting on a tip from two concerned citizens, D.A. Crabtree

went on, this government strike force, which he had created, was able to move swiftly in the apprehension of the suspects now in jail.

Mary and Longstreet carried one of the five foot tall saplings across the clearing to where Longstreet had dug his holes. I hobbled behind as best I could on the uneven ground.

"Curry said the forestry would be glad to donate heavy wire to string around these to protect them from the deer. He said he'd have the Youth Corps, or maybe that crew from the federal prison, check them from time to time to make sure they're doing all right." As Longstreet spoke, they set the sapling into a hole, kicked dirt around the roots, and stepped back. "But they'll grow," he said. "In a few years there'll be a healthy stand of oak trees growing here."

It had been Longstreet's idea to replant some of what Mike had helped steal. "I don't know," he said the day we drove out to the area. "It just seems something wants to grow here. Something needs to grow here. Seems awfully bare."

I felt quite a bit had grown out of Mike Anderson's death already, but planting the saplings was a nice added touch. He wanted a monument to his friend, to

remember his friend as he'd known him, as a nice honest kid, a family man, who'd had a moment of weakness, and planting the saplings was Longstreet's way of getting things back to where they were in his mind.

I leaned against Longstreet's truck watching him with his arm around Mary as they stood for a quiet moment next to the sapling, remembering Mike.

Longstreet didn't get the Hansel Lake Project bid. Some big lumber outfit south of us outbid everyone with a record two and a half million. But Longstreet was contracted to cut it, and that seemed to be all he needed and wanted out of the project. He was more than happy doing just that. There's something to be said about beauty in simplicity, about doing only what you need and want to do, like a tree growing—it uses only what it needs to grow.

For me there was a whole lot of positive growing going on already because of that incident out at Twisted Tree: in Longstreet and Mary something stronger was growing; in that clearing there was growth now, too, in these mountains. In me as well, for realizing all this.

Hell, things were lush all over now.



# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the December issue.*

The Chief of Intelligence was deeply worried. He had cause to be. Through a defecting agent of the Enemy he had just learned that information vital to his entire operation was being leaked. Such a leak could only have come through one of his secret agents, known by their code names as Parrot, Quail, Raven, Stork, and Thrush (actually their last names are Finney, Green, Hertz, Immel, and Jones). All five had been carefully screened and trained; each had given years of apparently faithful service; nevertheless, one of them had turned traitor. The situation could not continue.

To get to the core of the problem, the chief recalled all of them from their posts—Ulster, Vienna, Warsaw, Yemen, and Zagreb—where they had covers as an artist, a banker, a chemist, a doctor, and an editor (but not necessarily in that order).

(1) The first to arrive were Jones, Raven, and the spy from Warsaw, who were posing as an artist, a banker, and a chemist (not necessarily in that sequence).

(2) Laura, Parrot, and the banker have the last names of Green, Hertz, and Jones.

(3) The three male spies—Martin, Nathan, and Oliver—include Mr. Finney, Quail, and the chemist.

(4) Quail, Raven, and Stork include Nathan, Green, and the operator from Ulster.

(5) Quail did not pose as a banker.

(6) At the meeting, Hertz and Stork sat beside the chief, while Kathy sat opposite him, flanked by the editor and the agent from Yemen. The chief announced that a dossier on the betrayer had

been securely locked in his safe awaiting a decision. Unknown to the agents, the sheets of paper in the safe were blank, but the entire layout was rigged with alarms and surveillance cameras. It was a trap.

(7) The chemist left with Immel and the agent from Vienna.

(8) Jones discussed the matter with the spy from Yemen.

(9) Neither Martin nor the agent from Warsaw was seen the rest of the day.

(10) Late that night the traitor was clever enough to discover and disconnect the contacts for the cameras but overlooked one device that recorded the safe's being opened at two forty A.M.

Fortunately for them, at that precise time Mr. Finney, the artist, Thrush, and the agent from Zagreb were together at a night spot in the suburbs, celebrating their unexpected vacation. The boisterous four were well remembered by the bartender.

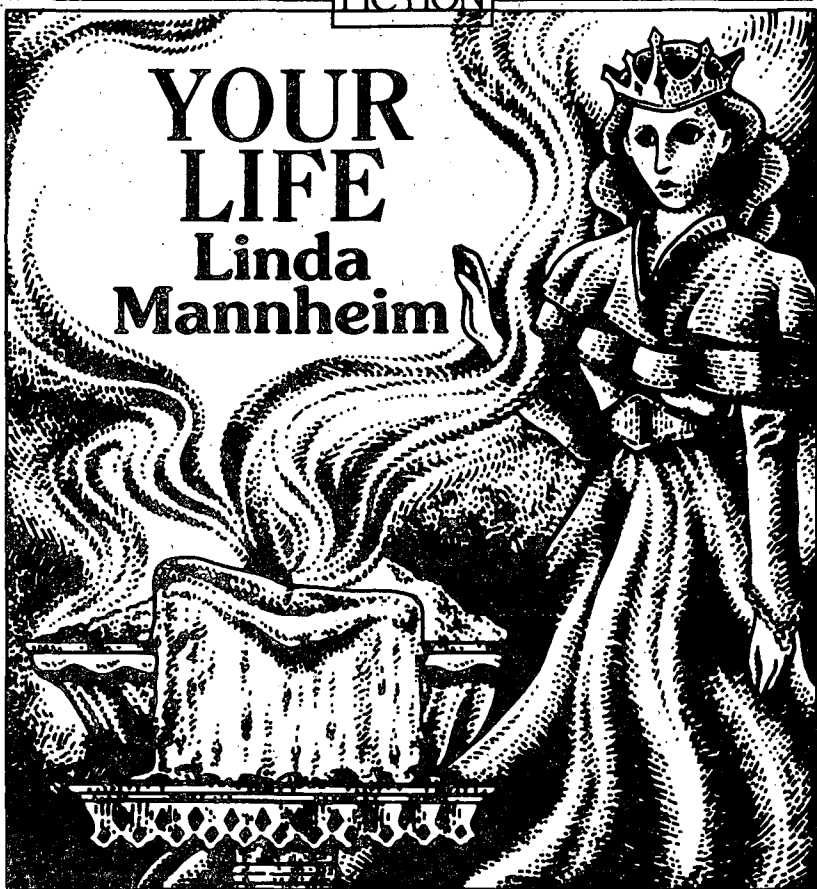
*The chief then knew who was the betrayer. Do you?*

---

See page 152 for the solution to the October puzzle.

# YOUR LIFE

Linda  
Mannheim



I wished my father would disappear, and he did.

I knew it even before I got the phone call from my mother. I turned to Paul, and I said, "He's gone."

Paul got his schoolboy look, swallowing slightly. It was early fall with the beginning of chill in the air and leaves turning—the

kind of weather Paul loves and I hate.

"I think my father's gone," I told him. "I really do."

"Rose," he said, smiling indulgently as people do when they're explaining something to a small child who is just starting to learn the way the world works, "that's just wishful thinking."

Call it what you want, I thought. I just knew something about the world felt different. There was no fear in the air. I walked lightly, nearly skipped, down the lane from the English Building to the car. Paul smiled at me, shrugged, and threw the briefcase stuffed with papers he had to grade in the back of his old Volvo. From the university we drove to Tenucci's on Route 12 and picked up some fresh linguine, some walnut parsley sauce, a baguette, and a bag of mixed greens to have for dinner that night. We listened to National Public Radio while we fixed the meal; Paul sipped some merlot, and stood over the pasta counting the exact three minutes he should wait until it was cooked al dente. Just as he was about to remove the pot from the flame, the phone rang.

"Let the machine answer it," he snarled, his glasses steaming so he had to take them off and wipe them.

I turned down the radio and picked up the phone. "Rosita?" my mother asked. She sounded like she was going to burst into tears, the way she did after my father got to her.

"Ma, you okay?"

"Okay?" she said, trying to suppress an odd sound that I realized was laughter and not sobs. Then, as if ashamed, she took a deep breath and swal-

lowed and said to me, "Rosita, it's your father. He's gone."

She continued, sounding both astonished and pleased, as though she'd won the big prize in the lottery. "He didn't come home one night, and I thought, that's just like your father. Then he didn't come home again. And then again. It's been three nights, Rosie. But I'll tell ya, I know he's gone."

"He's gone," I repeated, as much to let her know I knew it was true as to tell myself.

"Now the cops, they come by wanting to know this and that about him. Mrs. Nieves upstairs, she says she can do her thing to make the law go away. But I tell ya, I wanna know, is he gone for good?"

"He's gone for good," I tell my mother, as sure as someone who's seen the future.

"I know," my mother says. "But how?"

I could tell her what anyone would—that there are a thousand ways to disappear in New York—there could have been a mugger who panicked, or he might have passed out drunk somewhere, or maybe he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Instead I tell her, "I don't know how. But he's gone."

"Rosita," she says. "Come to New York. Come home."

A little panic rises when I hear her say the word home.

For ten years I have avoided this. Paul has never seen where I grew up. My mother sometimes met me in Connecticut, a halfway point, her face covered with bruises.

I watch Paul eating his pasta, reading the *New York Times* and sipping his merlot as he glares first at me, then at my plate of food that is getting cold.

"Please, Rosita," my mother asks. Then, uncannily, she adds, "Your father's gone."

She never called him her husband. He was always my father. When I told her why I wouldn't come, I always said it was because of him. Just come to the city, she'd say then. You don't have to come to the house. No, I'd tell her, as if he owned all of New York. "He's gone now," she says again.

I tell my mother, "Okay. This weekend."

"Tomorrow?" she asks.

It's Thursday.

"Tomorrow," I answer.

"This is a terrible idea," Paul tells me as we lie in bed, turning under the sheet so that the white goosedown quilt shimmers like the sea. His knee pokes me, always rail thin. He is bony and warm and pulls me towards him, then jumps away.

"Ow, Rose! Your feet are so cold."

"Sorry," I whisper.

He stays on his side of the bed as if there's a roll of barbed wire between us. "Rose," he says, turning to me now, his voice urgent. "You can't do this. Your comps are coming up in two weeks. You just can't go running off to your mother's now."

"My father's gone," I tell him.

"Your mother should be celebrating."

I turn from him.

"I'm sorry," he whispers right into my ear, ducking his head above mine from behind so I can feel his warm breath.

"Look," he says, trying to see my face. "Why don't you have your mother come here?"

"I'm going home," I tell him, turning on my back and looking up into his face now, barely visible in the moonlight seeping into the room, shadows playing against shadows against the long narrow angles. He's what they call aristocratic—pale and thin, almost seeming naked without the wire-rimmed glasses he always wears. I remember the first time I saw him, reading Keats in front of the class. I thought he would die young like that. I thought he was barely hanging onto life.

**D**own through Queens, you can see the city from the railroad tracks. When I see the skyline, my throat closes.

There goes the Chrysler Building, the Empire State, and every glass tower that ever pushed up through the ground. We used to go there, my mother and me, downtown, her showing me everything—the dinosaurs at the Museum of Natural History, Calder's mobiles at MOMA, where she used to live on the West Side before Lincoln Center went up—and then, we gotta go home, Rosie, get your father's dinner.

Into the tunnel and across the East River to Manhattan, to Penn Station where my mother—stands waiting for me, short and stocky in her dark dress and sweater. She stands beaming and pointing me out to a man about her age as I lug two bags, the larger one filled with books, books I brought to placate Paul.

My mother pulls me into her inescapable clutch, showering me with kisses while angry suburbanites stalk around us to the escalator. "Ma," I whisper, embarrassed but hugging her back. "We need to move."

The man, stocky like her, with almost all grey wavy hair combed back in a style that would have been fashionable forty years before, lifts my bag of books and says something quickly in Spanish.

"No," my mother tells him. "Don't bother with that. This

one doesn't speak any Spanish. Rosie, meet Mr. Nieves. He and his wife live upstairs."

"Humberto," he says, extending his hand even as he stays half bent. "I said you have a lot of books."

"I can take them," I offer. He waves me off.

"Mr. Nieves brought his car so we can have a ride home."

"Oh, thank you," I tell him.

We ride uptown in a big brown Impala with no shocks. Humberto takes Broadway up, and we stop and go at all the lights so I see Columbus Circle, a little bit of Central Park, the cement island separating the up and downtown traffic on the Upper West Side, and then the gates of City College and the old buildings that I swore gargoyles could fly off of when I was a girl. I've taken my coat off because it feels so much warmer here than in Massachusetts, that ripe fall weather that lets you know a smog blanket keeps the heat in. If you cut it open, the steam of the city would shoot out with a whoosh. A breeze that will never be clean flies in my face. My mama holds my hair back and asks me, "Rosie, you crying?"

The river shimmers like black ink on the other side of High Bridge Park, the tower poking up from the green and broken glass. And beyond that, the

Bronx. During the seventies, my mama would tell me about the buildings burning there, the blocks of rubble, and how one time my cousins came to stay when their building was gutted. After that I woke up pushing aside thick grey smoke, plumes of red and yellow flames licking the walls. I sat bolt up in my bed, screaming.

"A dream," my mother told me, pushing my hair from my face. "Nothing burns, Rosie."

I stopped sleeping, snuck books into bed.

He came and found me, my little light on under the covers, pulled me out by my arm, threw me against the wall. "What you trying to do there? Burn the house down?"

I dreamt there was a lady dressed in blue who came to rescue me. One day we're walking down St. Nicholas Avenue, my mother and me, and I see her—the lady in blue, like the Virgin. I pull my mother to the store, try to tell her, want to show her the statue of the lady in my dream. My mother keeps dragging me on as if I've done something bad. She tells me, "It's Santería, Rose," and slaps my wrist.

Now I understand, of course. The store was a *botanica*, selling statues and potions and things for people who prayed to statues of the saints that are renamed

with African—I mean, Yoruba—names. "Not real Catholics," my mother said, though she only prayed when there was nothing else left to do and grudgingly let my grandmother take me to my first communion. What it was really was that she thought Santería was a Cuban thing, and since she believed in an independent, socialist Puerto Rico, she had a silent burning war going with the Cubans who had fled Castro.

My mama brings me a glass of pineapple juice while I am sitting on the edge of the windowsill with my feet against the metal slats of the fire escape. "You be careful out there," she tells me.

"Mama, I'm twenty-eight years old."

"You're never too old to be careful," she tells me, leaning out on her elbows next to me.

Downstairs some kids run back and forth following one kid on his bicycle, and some girls are playing handball.

"Remember when you used to play down there?" my mother asks.

My mother has the unmistakable look of a woman who's been freed. Always heavy, always thinking her skin was too dark even though she said she didn't, she looks comfortable in her body for the first time. Her dyed brown hair is cut short, and a



breeze drifts through the curls. She's wearing a dark red silk shirt and a black skirt. She used to sit here and scream at me, "Get up here, Rosie! Get up here! Now!" Sound of terror in her voice. I knew it meant my father was coming home. She looked a thousand years older then.

"You and Tony," she says, smoothing my hair into place again.

"Tony and I never played together there," I tell her. "Tony was too old."

Tony, seventeen when he died in Vietnam, too old. Sorry his name's come up. She's gonna start it again, gonna start telling me how my father changed after Tony died.

Instead she asks, "Did you like Mr. Nieves?"

"He seemed nice," I tell her with a shrug.

"I want you to go upstairs later and get something for me from his wife. We've gotten to be very good friends. They've helped me a lot. They moved here from Queens a year ago. Mrs. Nieves wanted to be near the river. She said it reminds her of where she lived in Cuba when she was a girl."

"They're Cuban?" I ask, turning around.

"They left because of Batista," my mother assures me. "They're not *gusanos*."

I shrug.

"Later on," she says. "You can go visit while I'm cooking dinner."

On St. Nicholas horns are honking and music is coming out of storefronts. I remember the *botanica*. I must have seen the statue of the lady in blue there, then dreamt about her before I was fully aware of noticing her for the first time. That's why she must have come to me.

The Nieveses' apartment is on the river side of the building, up on the sixth floor, smaller than the one I grew up in but lighter and airier somehow. Breezes come in from the street with the traffic's honk. When I was a girl, I used to visit Peter Tse who lived two floors above us, and I was astounded at how different everything looked from Peter's window—smaller, like another world.

Migdalia Nieves has coarse, greying hair with just a little pepper in it pulled back behind her neck and moves slowly in a shortsleeved dress. She is built like my mother only more compact, and she has to stand on her toes to reach a fake walnut shelf in a hall made narrow by many boxes neatly stacked on the shelves. She motions for me to follow her into the living room, stops in front of the bur-

gundy-flocked couch, and puts the box down on a glass coffee table. She pulls out a plastic bag with a generous amount of white powder in it, then hands it to me saying I should tell my mother, "Same as before."

"What is this stuff?" I ask, taking the bag from her.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asks. "It's almost done."

Then I see her in the corner—the statue I saw in the store on St. Nicholas Avenue. Not thinking, I dart over to her. Migdalia Nieves follows.

"She's Yemaya," Migdalia Nieves explains. "*La orisha de—* the saint of the ocean. *La madre del mundo*. She protects womanhood and motherhood."

Yemaya's face is blissful and blank. She wears a flowing blue gown and a crown, is flanked by candles and powder. She is less than a foot high, and I reach out and put my hand to her hard, sculpted hair as if bestowing warmth on her head. Migdalia smiles at me, dark eyes questioning.

"She used to come to me," I blurt. "When I was a girl. When I couldn't sleep at night."

"We see your mother," says Migdalia. "In the elevator. Outside, at the store. We see her face and how much she has pain. We see when she doesn't stay, when she goes fast because of

your father. And we see your father doing things that hurt her."

I swallow.

The apartment smells like cooking meat and burnt coffee. "Do you know what happened to my father?" I ask.

"We lived in Santiago de Cuba," she answers, softly and pointedly as if I have asked a different question. "When *los locos—*"

"Crazies?"

"Fidel y los muchachos attacked La Moncada, Batista's men start coming to find out, did we know where the missing boys went? Were we hiding? Did we help? They said the next day they would come and we had to tell them something, so we called on Elegua. Elegua controls the gates, so we asked him to take away the soldiers. Not bad, though, to help them leave their lives. Then one day, later, later, much later, we see one of the men by the ocean, had become a fisherman. Elegua helped him leave his life."

"You saw him?" I ask, staring at her, skin dark as my mother's, wrinkles burnt into her face.

"For a moment only," she says. "Then he was gone. We called on Yemaya to help your mother, Elegua to help your father leave his life."

"I see."

"Coffee?"

She hands me the thick, sweet coffee that goes straight to my stomach, ready to burn holes.

"And you?" she asks, steering me towards a table with high-backed, wobbly chairs against one wall.

"Me what?" I ask.

"You," she says. "What do you want to change?"

"The date of my exams," I tell her with a smile. "That's a very personal question," I say, hating the words as soon as they leave my mouth, hearing Paul's voice instead of my own.

My mother leans to take a pan from the heat and rest it on the open oven door. "Rosita," she says without looking up, "hand me that towel there."

I hand her a stained dishtowel hanging from a nail on the wall, and the kitchen fills with the smell of meat as she takes the lid off the pan.

"I brought you your cocaine," I tell her, holding up the bag of white powder.

"What?" she snaps, finally looking at me. "Oh," she smiles, taking the bag from me.

"What is this stuff?" I ask, leaning back against the fridge.

She puts the bag on the table and puts the pan back in the oven. "It's just something Mrs. Nieves told me about," my mother says. She takes the bag and I follow her into the living room

where she puts the powder in a dish and lights a pink and a green candle.

"Mama," I ask, "are you practicing Santería now?"

"Don't be silly," she tells me, rushing back to the kitchen.

"Then what is all this?"

"All what?" she asks. "The candles, you mean? They're nothing. It's something Mrs. Nieves told me about."

She picks up a bowl and begins to stir furiously.

"Mrs. Nieves is a *madrina*, you know," my mother says, chattering fast. "That's a priestess. Did you know the Cuban revolution triumphed on January first? That's the day the high priests get the prophecy for the year. And the first time Fidel gave a speech after the triumph, a dove flew and landed on his shoulder. It means he's an *elegido*."

"A what?"

"He was chosen, Rosie. Give me that sugar."

"Mama," I say, handing the bag of sugar to her. "I thought you couldn't stand any religion."

"Well," she says. "You get older. Live and learn, Rosie. Set the table for me, will you, sweetie? Two places only, don't forget."

She adds the last triumphantly.

That night I lie in bed in my

old childhood room that was turned back into a living room after I left, and there are drums in the distance coming up from the river, an occasional car gunning, and a little argument coming up from the ground, but I lie awake listening to the apartment. I can't sleep here without listening, without waiting for a sound from the hall so I'll know if I should get ready. And then I hear it, a footstep in the hall, and I know it's him, that he'll come in and hit me and he'll get me worse if I'm not aware, if I'm not ready, if I don't hunch in a ball, cover myself, and get ready to keep him as far away as I can. It's not as bad if I know he's coming. He can't get me as bad. Then I realize he's gone. He's gone. He'll never hurt me again. I won't have to listen for sounds in the hall. Ever. Not in Massachusetts, not here, not anywhere. And this knowledge changes things so completely I start to sob. And I feel her fingertips on my forehead, and I feel the soft fabric against my arm, glimpse the blue in a blur. "Yemaya," I whisper.

I sob some more.

"Stop it, Rosie," she says softly. "It's okay. It's okay now."

But I can't stop. This fear I've carried with me all my life, what will it be like to live without it now?

"Rosie," my mother says. "It's okay now. I'm here."

"Mama?" I whisper.

She's wearing her blue Qiana nightgown, smells like talcum, and her hands are warm.

I drift off again.

I can hear birds, the grind of a bus. The sky is turning that impossible blue it gets before the sun gets up above the buildings. Finally it's daytime. The apartment is silent, so my mother must be in the other room, asleep. I phone Paul on the old black dial telephone. He answers, angrily, "What?"

"Paul, it's me. Rose."

Voice all in his nose still, he asks, "Jesus, what time is it?"

"I don't know."

"Are you okay?" he asks. "Rose, where are you?"

"I'm at home," I tell him. "Nothing's wrong. I just needed to talk to you."

Long silence.

I ask, "Hello?"

"I'm right here," Paul says. "It's just . . ." I can hear him struggling to keep the anger out of his voice, words coming from between his teeth. "I wish you'd remember this is the only day I get to sleep late."

I feel my throat close. Then a tear slips down my cheek. Then another.

Paul coughs. "I'm sorry," he

says. "I just wish you'd think about me every once in a while."

He starts to chatter about all the things he needs to do, the articles he needs to write, the dinner party he needs to go to, but I can't hear what he's saying. My mind starts flipping over and over—the candles, the white powder, the lady in blue. My father's gone. *He left his life.*

"Paul," I say suddenly, interrupting him mid-sentence. "Do you know anything about Santería?"

"Voodoo?" he asks. "Rose, make sure you spend a lot of time on the Brontës. I don't know why you asked Torque to be on your committee. You don't have any feeling for that stuff, and he's a maniac about it."

"Will the police come again?" I ask my mother.

We're on the Circle Line Ferry, going around Manhattan, going from the Hudson all the way around to the Harlem River, across Spuyten Duyvil where two boys drowned a long time ago, before she and her family came to the mainland from Puerto Rico, but the way she told me about it when I was little I believed it had happened the day before. I've always been afraid of that part of the river, as if I could drown just by looking at it.

"About your father?" my moth-

er asks. "Rosie, where you been all these years? You think they care?"

I shrug.

The wind, so constant, sweeps against us and makes it hard to catch words.

"Mama," I ask, "what happened to him?"

She shrugs. "Mrs. Nieves showed me what to do. He's gone."

I shake my head.

"I don't know what to believe," I tell her. "You sent me to her apartment because you couldn't tell me yourself."

"Rosie," she says, "your father was a different man when I met him. Before you were born, he was in jail for the independence work he was doing."

"I know," I snap as the boat turns north into the Harlem River. I've heard this story too many times.

"Your father was different before he went to jail. And then he could never seem to make enough to support us, and that ate at him. And then when Tony died . . . But the man he was before that . . . I could always see that man inside him, and that's why I stayed."

My mother hugs her arms in the wind and leans out, looking toward the Bronx. We pass Yankee Stadium, and I watch her eyes half close, seeing how relaxed she looks. Monday she'll

go back to her teacher's aide job at P.S. 173. I'll be back in Massachusetts, back at the university.

I see the city, the Bronx on my right and Harlem on my left, and suddenly I realize I have always had this city as a part of me, always felt love rise in me when I saw it on a movie screen in a theater far away, always felt a familiarity and a recognition I could not describe. It was fear that kept me away. It was him, and now he's gone.

"Beg your pardon," I tell Migdalia Nieves as I fall into my best academic New England behavior that means nothing here. "Not to be rude. But do you know what it is that happened to my father?"

She sips her coffee and answers, "What I tell you is what you already know."

I shake my head because she is looking away for a minute and I think she won't see, but she does and tells me, "You don't have to believe. Your mother, she worries about you. She asked me to consult the cowrie shells for you because she doesn't think you're happy. She doesn't think you tell her the truth."

"Oh," I say, my eyes narrowing. "And what's the truth?"

"You're with a man you don't love. You're doing what you

don't love because you think it's safe."

I feel heat rise inside me.

"You love the books," she continues, "but you don't love that world. And he—he was your teacher when you met him, and you had to keep your love a secret at first. That was when you had love between you."

"My mother told you that," I whisper.

"You sleep beneath a feather quilt at night, and he turns from you because he says your feet are too cold."

I swallow.

"He has no love inside him any more. He has only fear and sadness, and that's all he will give you, and if you stay with him, you'll stay with him because of fear instead of love. I'm sorry. It's what I saw. It doesn't have to be that way. You don't have to cry."

She hands me a tissue.

"You can change him?" I ask. "You can . . . make him leave his life?"

I think of the best parts I ever knew of Paul emerging again.

Migdalia Nieves shakes her head. "Your mother," she tells me, "it was different for her. She didn't have a way out. For you it's something else." She puts her hand on my wrist and tells me, "You can go if you want. He will find his way. You can leave your life." □

FICTION

# Halloween Turkey

Sharon Mackey



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



~~~~~  
**W**hen I hung my sign, MARCY MURDOCK, P.I., outside Jeb's old law office, chasing after pumpkin thieves wasn't exactly what I had in mind. But since Deerfoot is such a small town and it had been months since I'd been summoned to the aid of my fellow Tennesseans, I decided to take the case.

When it comes right down to it, I'm really just an after-hours private eye. At least that's when I find time to do most of my investigating, when I have something to investigate. On weekdays, from morning until early afternoon I'm usually enlightening the illustrious teen sector about the nobility of the unknowns  $x$  and  $y$  in my math classes at Deerfoot High. It's a concept they continue not to grasp. But pumpkin stealing, now that's something they can get a handle on.

It was the week before Halloween, and I'd already been razzed about my sign, students calling me Mrs. Perry Mason and so on. I didn't mind so much. My goal as a girl growing up in Deerfoot was to either make fancy cards for Hallmark or be Nancy Drew. Solving for  $x$  has its moments, but let's face it, in the real world the equations are a little more complicated and a heck of a lot harder to solve, if you can even come close.

My late husband Jeb had his law office in the upper portion of a large white frame house two blocks from Main Street. The house is owned by Prudence Geasley, whose elderly sister Moss was thought to have been clobbered by a concrete deer in her own front yard on the morning of July Fourth. I took the case as a favor to Bobby Ed Flathers, who'd been locked up for the crime. That was my second case as a detective. I've only been hired for money once, for the Curly Pridemore case.

And now the pumpkin escapade would put another notch on my crime belt. Of course, I did some of my finest work when Jeb was alive. His criminal defense practice required some heavy duty investigating, and he offered me the work as long as he could play Samson with every Delilah who came along. It was a fair trade. I got to exercise what Jeb called my sixth sense, and Jeb got to exercise. Period.

I was sitting at Jeb's desk making big red X's on Gene Lipscomb's algebra quiz when I heard the downstairs screen door slam and voices whispering up the steps. I recognized Whitey and Doris Spurlock right away. I'd just put a D+ on their daughter Doris Kay's algebra quiz. They were standing in the doorway, Doris fiddling with her wedding ring and Whitey clasping his hands togeth-

er under his beer belly. Neither one of them looked particularly lighthearted. "What can I do for you?" I said, looking over my wood veneer desk.

Doris quickly shook a finger at me. "We want you to catch who's stealin' our pumpkins," she said.

Whitey nodded. "Yes'm, we've been puttin' out new ones on the front porch now for more'n six days, and ever mornin' they're gone again."

My heart sank. I wondered if perhaps they'd mistaken my P.I. title for Pumpkin Investigator. "Pumpkins, huh?" I said.

Doris unsnapped her black pocketbook and took out her change purse. "We put 'em out for decoration, you know. Whitey's dad grows the pumpkins hisself, so we get 'em for free, but if you catch these—"

"Outlaws," inserted Whitey.

"—we'll pay you twice what Whitey's dad charges, for each one that was stolen," finished Doris. She beamed as if this would be quite a walloping sum of money.

"Happens ever year," said Whitey. "But this time it's been specially bad. We no sooner put 'em out than some idiot snatches 'em up again. We're sick to death of it. So far this year we're missing—" Whitey unclasped his fingers for counting purposes "—eleven." He rebuckled his hands. "Pa's been missin' some, too," he added.

"Whitey's dad charges three dollars each, so that'll be sixty-six dollars for you so far," said Doris. She looked so pleased with her offer that I mumbled an okay. She handed Whitey a five dollar bill that he left on my desk before they clambered back down the steps.

I immediately had some suspects. Gene Lipscomb and Marlon Monhollon, two of my sophomores, were known for this type of juvenile behavior. In fact, they'd been bragging all over Deerfoot High how, this summer, they'd stolen corn right off the stalk from Mayrene Gidley's garden and given it to the heifers down the road.

Speaking of large-boned mammals, the next day, Halloween, I confiscated a note from Doris Kay Spurlock during algebra class. Doris Kay, the author, had casually placed it on the desk of Rowena Grubb, who was sitting across the aisle from her, when I slapped my hand down on the note and dropped it into my dress pocket. Doris Kay sank down into her chair and started making curlicues with a pencil in the margin of her algebra homework.

It wasn't until my lunch half-hour that I remembered the note. I

~~~~~  
opened it at my desk while sipping a cherry Coke. Written amongst an elaborate border of daisies intertwined with hearts, it read:

*Dear Rowena,*

*Ms. Murdock has a burr on her dress. Ha! Ha! Odell's fitting me out after school. He's gonna take some shots then make me famous!*

*D. K.*

I sipped my Coke slowly. There was only one Odell in Deerfoot and that was Odell Harp, sole proprietor of Odell's Bakery and, of late, Odell's Bakery and Glamour Shots. He came to town about three years ago and wasn't at all the type of man the Spurlocks or any other God-fearing parent would like to see their daughter with. First of all, he was closer to my age, a good twenty years older than Doris Kay. Second of all, he was thrice divorced, and most of all, he had "War Boys" tattooed on his left upper arm beneath a fire-breathing dragon. I like to think I'm open-minded, but in Deerfoot having a tattoo is like having a dirty word stamped on your forehead. It's just not nice. I knew it wouldn't sit well with Doris and Whitey Spurlock to have their daughter cohorting with the likes of Odell Harp. Although he did make a mean bran muffin.

I figured the "fitting out" and "taking some shots" meant Doris Kay was getting glamorized by Odell after school. And it sounded as if he'd promised her a New York City kind of fame. This had me worried because, as I suggested earlier, Doris Kay's not exactly glamour material. With some help she'd do fine on the cover of *Farm Woman Weekly*. She just wouldn't be ready to grace the covers of *Cosmo* or *Vanity Fair* in anybody's lifetime. No doubt Odell was playing on her romantic ideals for his own gain.

It was here my sixth sense threw me a bone to chew. But I couldn't quite get my teeth around it. I stuck the note in my desk drawer, finished my lunch, got the burr off my dress, and began to plan my pumpkin stakeout. I knew better than to confront Gene and Marlon beforehand. They wouldn't like confessing their tomfoolery to a teacher and would probably deny it outright. No, I would have to catch them redhanded to prove their guilt.

I thought about asking my younger brother Rex to do pumpkin duty for me, but he had a hot date with Vernita Broome, the cashier down at the Corner Drugstore. They were going to see *Las Vegas Vampires* at the drive-in.

So there I was, on Halloween night, hiding behind a mock orange

~~~~~  
bush with Jeb's flashlight. It was turned off, of course, seeing as how daylight was still in effect. I usually carry a can of pocket Mace on my detective excursions, but I figured "Stop, thief!" would be all the weapon I needed to scare Gene Lipscomb and Marlon Monhollon into dropping the pumpkins.

The Spurlocks lived in a two story farmhouse about three miles from town. They didn't live in the kind of neighborhood where kids could walk from house to house for trick-or-treating. In fact, the houses on their two-lane blacktop were separated by mile-long stretches of hay crops and cow fields. That night they had set five pumpkins, a bale of hay, and some tall corn around a scarecrow on the front porch. I could see Doris and Whitey peeking through the curtains in the living room about every ten seconds.

Soon a pickup truck full of homemade costumes drove up. The contents knocked on the front door, and Doris gave each one a popcorn ball and a pat on the head. They climbed back into the truck and drove off down the road to the next candy stop. This went on for a good hour, vehicles driving up, kids rushing to the door, Doris providing popcorn balls. Nobody seemed the least bit interested in the pumpkins on the front porch. After a while the activities came to a near halt. Doris and Whitey immersed themselves in something on TV, leaving their watchdog activities to me. After all, Whitey *had* already forked over a down payment for my services.

Apparently the five dollars was enough to get me there but not enough to keep me awake. Tomorrow being a school day, I started nodding off. I woke up to a full moon and a large ghost slamming the trunk of a dark Corvette, forest green I thought. The ghost climbed behind the wheel just as a witch complete with fake black hair and green skin shut the door on the passenger side. My eyes darted toward the porch and I fumbled for the flashlight, turning the beam toward the scarecrow. I actually cursed. The pumpkins were gone.

I ran behind the house where I'd parked Jeb's old pickup and spun gravel to catch up with the Corvette, realizing that the thieves could be anybody who had happened to drive up while I was asleep. But for now the trunk-slamming duo were the only suspects I had. For trick-or-treaters they were in a heck of a hurry, and I doubted they'd been putting Doris's popcorn balls in the trunk. I could barely see the red taillights in front of me turning curves like something out of *MacGyver*. The road was pitch black, and Jeb's pickup was having more than a little trouble taking the curves at any kind of

~~~~~  
speed at all. Fifteen minutes later I lost the taillights completely and gave up the chase. The Corvette could have turned into any number of dirt roads posted with BEWARE OF DOG and PRIVATE PROPERTY signs.

I made a U-turn in the road between two cow fields and headed back toward the Spurlocks’.

“How’d it go?” asked Whitey, bundled up in a flannel robe and plaid slippers. He tightened the cloth belt around his protruding belly. Doris had some kind of net cap pulled over a mountain of pink curlers in her hair. She patted the side of her head nervously.

I stood beside the pumpkin-bare display on the front porch. “I’m afraid I lost ‘em,” I said. Of course I was asleep at the time, I neglected to add.

They looked at each other and decided to put out some more pumpkins tomorrow evening for a potential repeat performance of the pumpkin snatchers. I didn’t bother to tell them that the thieves probably wouldn’t be back, since pumpkin-poaching season ends at midnight on Halloween and no juvenile in Deerfoot would be caught dead stealing a pumpkin on November first or thereafter. It just wouldn’t be cool.

I stood there nodding my head, letting Doris stuff my jacket pockets with popcorn balls. “They’re low-fat, you know,” she said, giving me a smug little smile as if I were the mother heifer.

I munched one of her chewy caramel creations on my way home, studying the implications of the evening. I now had serious reservations about my two initial suspects, Gene Lipscomb and Marlon Monhollon. I knew that Gene had a driver’s license and Marlon didn’t. I also knew that neither boy owned a car, much less a sports car like a Corvette. If they’d borrowed the car, Gene must’ve been wearing stilts because that was a mighty tall ghost climbing behind the steering wheel and Gene’s just a wiry little thing, no more than a teenage Barney Fife. And from the three-second scenario I witnessed from behind the mock orange bush, the thieves were more than just pranksters. There was no giggling, no lollygagging, no fun involved whatsoever. These Halloween heisters were as serious as a Sunday morning heart attack.

On a whim, I decided to backtrack in the direction the Corvette had taken. It was only eight forty-five, and I figured, it being Halloween and all, the thieves might be biding their time behind a deserted barn before pouncing on another unsuspecting pumpkin owner.



I drove slowly along the curves of the dark two lane blacktop, nothing in sight but an occasional porchlight, the night air growing colder than witch's toes. I was working on my second popcorn ball when I spotted something unusual. I pulled into a gravel driveway on my right, turned off my headlights, and stopped Jeb's truck where a gate should have been had the gate been closed. But it was standing wide open with a ragged white cloth caught on one corner near the lock and chain.

I kept the truck idling and got out for a closer inspection. It was a piece of white material all right, from a sheet or a white pillowcase. Perhaps a ghost ripped his costume on the gate while opening it in a hurry. Perhaps a tall pumpkin-stealing ghost.

I got back behind the wheel and drove slowly down the gravel road about half a mile until I saw some faint window lights through the woods in the distance. I pulled Jeb's truck over as far as possible, scraping the passenger side with tree limbs. I decided to walk the last quarter mile toward the house. All I needed was a glimpse of a Corvette or a pile of pumpkins in the yard, preferably both.

I started walking, my knees wobbling. For a simple pumpkin operation, I was more afraid than a black cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I reached in my pocket for Jeb's flashlight and cursed again. I'd laid it on the front seat, since Doris had filled my pockets with popcorn balls. Now I felt like the Fool from Farm City walking through unknown woods toward a stranger's house with a jacket full of popcorn balls. I supposed if bad went to worse I could always claim to be with the Welcome Wagon.

As I approached the house, it turned out that Doris's popcorn balls were exactly what I needed. The house was a red brick bungalow surrounded by a makeshift cargo truck and seven or eight rusted-out automobiles, one of which anchored the meanest sounding mongrel I'd ever heard. He darted out from under a dilapidated Thunderbird and leapt toward me until the chain around his neck jerked him back to the ground. He tried this three times before I could get a popcorn ball unwrapped. I tossed three of them at his feet, and he started chomping like King Kong. I figured all the caramel would keep his big white teeth stuck together until I got a good look around the house.

It didn't take long to find a black Corvette pulled up close to a basement door in the back. Both car doors were locked. I inspected the rest of the yard, finding no sign of pumpkins. Not one.

With every intention of eavesdropping, I tiptoed toward a side

~~~~~  
window and took a quick look through the glass. The black-haired witch was talking to someone I couldn't see. Her back was toward me at the window, but she suddenly spun around and the metallic-green face of Doris Kay Spurlock shot me a wicked grin. I ducked, hoping she hadn't seen me.

I crouched under the window for a few more minutes, dizzying thoughts rumbling through my brain. Was Doris Kay stealing her own pumpkins? And why? Now, *that* was the question of the day. Shortly I decided to hightail it back to Jeb's truck while the caramel was holding out.

It would've been easy enough to find out who lived in the brick bungalow—Deerfoot's not exactly Minneapolis. But if indeed Doris Kay had been the one I saw in the house, I strongly suspected the subject of Doris Kay's note. Odell Harp.

My questions were pretty much answered when Doris Kay showed up in class the next day with little dabs of green paint on her temples right near her ears. *And* she was murmuring Odell-this and Odell-that to Rowena Grubb before the tardy bell rang.

Interrogating Doris Kay would be tricky, since she was a student and my questions were totally unrelated to school. She would no doubt see her juicy personal life as none of my business. And it was highly possible the information I wanted could get her into deep doo-doo with her parents.

I graded papers in Jeb's office until four o'clock that afternoon. Then I called Spurlock's Super Value Hardware. I knew Doris worked with Whitey at the hardware store on occasion.

"Spurlock's Super Value Hardware, Doris speakin'," she answered.

"Doris? Marcy Murdock here. Sorry to bother you at work, but I need to see you and Whitey this afternoon."

"Why, it's no bother, Marcy." She lowered her voice. "Is somethin' up?"

"I really can't say over the phone. When can you come to my office?" I said.

She was whispering now. "Have you—do you—is it urgent?"

"Yes, yes, it is, Doris," I lied. "When can you make it?"

"Well, I s'pose we can be there at five, soon as we close up shop. That soon enough?" She was more excited than a hound dog on a raccoon's trail.

"That'll be just fine. I'll see you then. Oh, one more thing. If I'm not here, just wait for me in the office. I'll leave the door open."





With Whitey and Doris occupied for at least an hour, I hopped in the truck and soon found myself knocking on the Spurlocks' front door. Doris Kay poked her head out. "Oh, uh, Miz Murdock," she said.

"Hello, Doris Kay. Mind if we have a little chat?"

"Uh, no." She came out on the porch wearing an orange football jersey and black leggings. Doris Kay, bless her heart, looked like the Great Pumpkin had sprouted black tree trunks. The leftover green paint was still smudged on her face where her long, stringy hair was tucked behind each ear.

She folded her arms and pressed her lips together. "Listen, Miz Murdock," she began, "if it's about my grades, I can do better. I can study real hard and—"

"I'm here on other business, Doris Kay," I said.

"Other bizness?" she said.

I nodded. "An investigation."

"Oh." Her look of deep concern turned to pure confusion.

"How well do you know Odell Harp?"

She looked down at her black Reeboks, then gave her hair a swish, just like it was a horse's tail. "He's my manager."

"Manager?" I said.

"You know, modelin'. He's been takin' my pitcher ever day after school, you know, different poses and stuff, and sendin' 'em off to big modelin' agencies. He says it won't be long till we get some good news." She grinned, revealing a set of crooked little teeth.

I cleared my throat. "Do your parents know about this?"

She looked sideways and up, twisting her lips, shaking her head slowly. "Not really," she squeaked. "I told 'em I got a job workin' at Odell's bakery after school. That's all they think I'm doin' over there, just workin'."

I decided to be blunt in my next line of questioning. "Does Odell drive a Corvette?" She nodded. "Doris Kay, have you and Odell been stealing your mama's pumpkins?"

She blew a little steam out her nose and put her hands on her beefy hips. "This ain't fair," she said.

"Pumpkin stealing is against the law, Doris Kay."

"It ain't no big crime," she said. "Besides, Odell needs them pumpkins."

I guess that answered my question.

"For what purpose does Odell need pumpkins?" I asked.

"For your information, *pies*," she said.



I fought hard to stifle a sudden case of the giggles. Doris Kay was either dumber than dumb or she had the driest sense of humor this side of the Mississippi. I was betting on the former. "Pies?" I said, looking her straight in the eye without so much as a smirk.

"Why yeah, Miz Murdock. Odell makes dozens of pumpkin pies this time of year, and do you know the price of canned pumpkin these days? It's higher'n a hornet's nest," she said. "Odell says people just throw their pumpkins out to rot after Halloween anyway, so he helps people get rid of 'em by stealing 'em. You know, recycling."

I had to admit it was convincing. But I could not believe Odell would rather go to the trouble of stealing and hollowing out a pumpkin than spend a few cents on the canned product. I decided to pursue the matter. "How many pumpkins does Odell need to make his pies?"

"I think we took in right around a hundred."

I swallowed. "A hundred?" Now *my* hands were on my hips. "Where'd he get that many?"

"Different places," she said, studying her shoestrings.

"Doris Kay, it would take until Christmas to hollow out all of those pumpkins, much less make pies out of them."

She swished her hair again, a move she'd no doubt perfected at the Odell School of Glamour. "If Odell says he needs 'em, he needs 'em," she said.

"Where does he keep all these pumpkins?" I asked. She made the motion of zipping her mouth shut. "At his house?" I prodded. She shook her head. "The bakery?" She started humming a nervy little tune. "I'd hate to bring the police in on this little escapade, Doris Kay," I said.

"They're just pumpkins!" she said. And she did have a point. I couldn't see Sheriff Don Earl Keck bringing his posse around to search for a load of squash. Albeit stolen squash. He just wasn't the type. Before I left, Doris Kay made me cross my heart and hope to die if I told her parents anything about her modeling career with Odell Harp. I neglected to tell her she was about to come up against some competition in the glamour world. Me.

Whitey and Doris were gone by the time I got back to Jeb's office. It was five twenty-two. I dialed Odell's Bakery and Glamour Shots.

"Odell's. What can I do you for?" he said as if he were trying to swallow a handful of mixed gravel.

"I'd like to make an appointment for some boudoir pictures," I said sweetly.



His tone suddenly mellowed. "And just who might you be, darling?" he asked.

"My name's, uh, Ivey Blue," I said, staring at Jeb's fake ivy plant in a blue pot.

"Is it Miss Blue or Mrs.?"

"Miss." As if this were vital information.

"Okay. I've got some openings tomorrow at—"

"How about tonight? I'm going out of town in the morning, and I'd like to have the pictures taken before I go. Can I come over right now?"

"Well, I was hammerin' out some gingerbread but, uh, I guess so, yeah. Now'd be fine."

"Thanks a bushel," I said. "Be there in a jiffy."

Main Street was nearly deserted when I got there. I opened the heavy glass door and walked past the gaudy wedding cakes in the window. The place smelled like cinnamon and ginger with a dash of LectricShave. It was clear from the empty trays that Odell had already refrigerated all of his baked goods. Darn, I couldn't even get a good look at one of his pumpkin pies. I was sure I could tell a canned pie from a fleshy pumpkin pie.

It was then I had to stop and stare hard at Odell's advertisement for Glamour Shots. He had a huge square of cardboard propped up on an easel with cheap photographs of Doris Kay plastered all over it. There was Doris Kay in red sequins stretched out on a fake polar bear rug with a red rose between her teeth. There was Doris Kay in black, silver-studded leatherette clutching a motorcycle helmet under one arm. There was Doris Kay in white satin with a feathery pink boa swathed around her neck. Apparently Whitey and Doris Spurlock had not seen these fetching photographs of their daughter.

"Hello there," said Odell, breaking my concentration. He towered beside me in tight jeans and a dirty white apron covering a tank top that was four sizes too small. He stuck his hand out, crushing my fingers. "Ready?" he said, wiggling his bushy eyebrows at the display of Doris Kay. Again I had to stare. He wasn't the kind of person you could imagine making fluffy white cakes and pecan swirls.

"Sure," I said, biting my tongue. I followed him back to a large kitchen with a wooden table covered with flour and gingerbread dough. Soon we were in a small room off to the side where a camera on a tripod faced three white walls. Next to the camera was a box full of long beaded necklaces, hats, gloves, fake flowers, feather boas, and fishnet stockings, all in a rainbow of colors. Hanging on a

rack behind the camera were various glamour garments in small, medium, or large with an array of matching shoes on the floor beneath.

Here, I would bet my pantyhose, I heard Odell say, "Go to it, Pebbles." And that with a wink. *Pebbles*? I glanced around the room, wondering if Odell nicknamed all of his glamour inductees. "You can change here and open the door when you're ready." He winked again and bulged the dragon tattoo on his right bicep, then closed the door.

I rummaged through the box, slinging hats and boas and long beaded necklaces about. Was I really going through with this? For a piddly sixty-six dollars? I suddenly realized I wasn't in it for the money, not this time. The reputation of an innocent young lady was at stake here. Besides, if Odell did have a hundred pumpkins stashed away somewhere, at three dollars each his little recycling game had turned into a first class felony.

I finally put on a silky black gown with a matching lacy robe, squeezing my feet into some high-heeled silver slippers. Although the gown suggested I was lacking in the chest department, I had to admit I felt glamorous. As much as anybody could in a town like Deerfoot. I was beginning to see how Doris Kay could get caught up in it all. Bless her heart.

I opened the door, and Odell started making hip moves and whistling. "Lookin' mighty good, Ivey," he said. I had turned around to see who Ivey was before I realized he was talking to me. I watched while he spread the fake polar bear rug on the floor and showed me how to lie down on one side, resting my head on one elbow while kicking a perky heel in the air behind me. And all this while looking lusciously at the camera. I decided to make my move while he was in the throes of foolishness.

I sashayed toward him, my lace in full swing. "Odell, honey?" I said.

"Yes?" He drew the word into at least three syllables, widening his grin.

"Show me that little kick again," I said.

He threw his black boot into the air behind him about as gracefully as an elephant in heat.

"I think I've almost got it, but, Odell honey, where's the powder room?"

"Oh, uh, well, we ain't exactly got a *powder* room, but there's a john down the hall, across from the refrigerator."



"Be right back," I said, trying to muster a smile Odell could wallow in. I closed the door and scuttled toward the kitchen, opening every cabinet, every closet, every breadbox I could see, looking for pumpkins or a sign of pumpkin pie. In the refrigerator I found nothing but big plastic cannisters full of dough and cake frosting. I even checked the bathroom. Unless Odell had a hidden dungeon, there were no pumpkins on the premises. I pranced back into the studio, where Odell was standing behind the tripod licking his lips. "Uh, Odell honey, can we sort of postpone this little session here tonight?" I said.

He scratched his head. "You mean do it some other time?"

"Yes. That's what I mean," I lied again. It would take James Dean on satin sheets to get me back into Odell's studio.

Odell sighed big, wrinkling a nose that looked like it had been broken in three places. "For Pete's sake, Miss Ivey," he began, his voice growing gravelly, "I left my cookie dough on the table for you. I don't take kindly to people wastin' my time."

"You take pretty kindly to Doris Kay Spurlock, don't you, Odell?"

He stiffened up, flexing his massive arms. "I *am* her manager," he said.

"So I've heard." I decided right there to cut our little conversation real short, since Odell's eyes were turning beady and his jaw was starting to form a life of its own. "It's my bursitis," I said for lack of another lame excuse. "It's actin' up. I'm real sorry to bother you, Odell." I grabbed my clothes and ran out of the bakery, leaving Odell clenching his teeth and working his neck muscles into a frenzy. I was driving Jeb's truck past the Spurlocks' before I realized I was still wearing the glamour garb.

Figuring Odell would be deep in cookie dough for a while, I headed down through the woods to the red brick bungalow. I stopped for a minute to change from my silver slippers to my dirty Reeboks. I suddenly felt terribly unglamorous.

I threw my jacket over the black gown and parked the truck near the back of the house, digging the last popcorn ball from my jacket pocket. Odell's dog snatched it in mid-air with a single bound. I then hustled down a steep row of concrete steps to Odell's basement door.

As I suspected, the door was locked up tight, and there were no windows where a stranger could accidentally discover what was on the other side. I ran back to Jeb's truck and wrestled a medium-sized crowbar from the toolbox he always kept under the seat. Odell's dog had already finished the popcorn ball and was now yelping for more.



I had to work fast. The basement door was wooden, with peeling green paint and a rusty knob. I grunted and pried on the lock for about two minutes before the wood around the knob splintered and popped open. I immediately smelled pumpkin flesh and something else that made my nose twitch.

I opened the door and walked into Odell's secret hobby. There were pumpkins everywhere in different stages of being butchered and hollowed out and stuffed. Yes, stuffed. Just like Thanksgiving turkeys. Except Odell's recipe didn't exactly call for cornbread and chopped celery. About two hundred marijuana plants were growing there under little lights, and about two hundred more were hanging up to dry. Most of the hollowed pumpkins were turned on their sides with the bottoms lying all over the floor, and several had had their innards replaced with what looked like white kitchen garbage bags. I pulled a plastic bag out of a pumpkin and checked the contents. It was marijuana all right, dried to a fine crisp. My hunch was that Odell Harp was planning on making a delivery soon with a hundred stolen pumpkins stuffed full of the dried product. "Pies, schmies," I mumbled, taking one of the plastic bags as evidence to show Sheriff Keck.

Needless to say, I got the sheriff's attention in my glamour getup complete with Reeboks and a bag full of the bad stuff. He sniffed the contents, then headed for the Harp place to have a look-see.

As it turned out, Odell had been running the pumpkin scheme for the entire three years he'd lived in Deerfoot. But this year he'd decided the pumpkins were getting too darned expensive. Doris Kay was a habitual patron of the bakery and became obsessed with the glamour end of the business. Since her granddaddy owned a pumpkin farm, Odell decided to play on her girlish sentiments and make an accomplice out of her without her knowledge. He told her she was another Christie Brinkley and promised her free cream horns if she'd help him steal the pumpkins.

The next week, Odell went from the Poke County jail here in Deerfoot to the state prison. And much to my surprise, I saw Doris Kay holding hands with Gene Lipscomb. Word has it they're going together. Where they're going is anybody's guess.

The Spurlocks handed me ninety-six dollars in cash for a total of sixteen pumpkins they'd had stolen off their front porch. But I consider my real reward was freeing the mind of a young and vulnerable Doris Kay from a loser like Odell Harp. That and my silver boudoir slippers, of course. □

FICTION

# OUR CLOSING HYMN

Pamela Blackwood

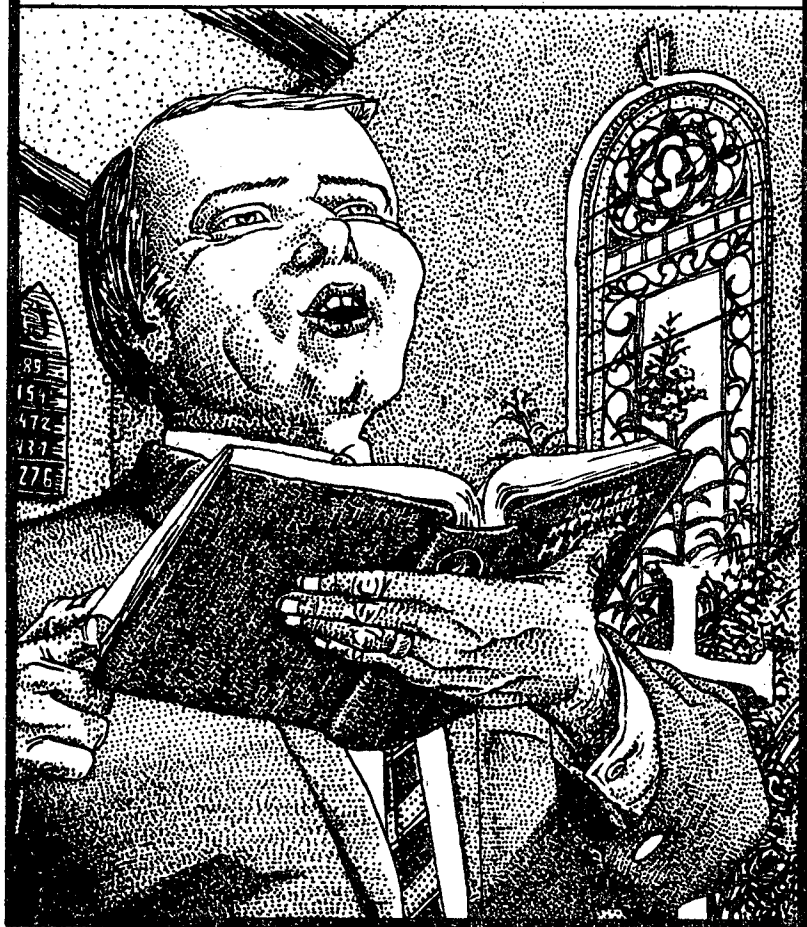


Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/96

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



---

---

**“R**everend, did you hear me?”

The Reverend James Fulton, so new to the cloth that his brain did not yet register the title, had not. He had instead been listening to the quiet weeping emanating from the next room and wondering if his semester in “Dying and the Bereaved” could be better employed across the hall.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Sturgess.” He pushed his glasses up by the right earpiece and hoped she had not noticed that he had barely met her glance once during the entire interview. “What did you say?”

“I asked if you’d like some coffee. Someone brought the urn over from the church kitchen. The neighbors have been just wonderful through this whole thing. If you’d like a piece of pie or some of Rhonda Scott’s chocolate pound cake or a slice of my homemade key lime cheesecake—”

“No, thank you,” he said rather too quickly and then set out to change any impression he might have made. “Mrs. Allan brought me enough leftovers from the dinner yesterday to last a week, and I ate most of them for lunch.”

It was a lie, but Mrs. Sturgess chuckled and that was what he had intended. In truth, he had not thought about food once

since standing by the hospital bed of Randall Sturgess the day before and watching him die. It had seemed fitting to witness his end, since James had been in on the thing from the beginning, had watched the man grow quiet and sicken at the chicken pie Sunday dinner at the church, had transported him to the hospital, waited with his morose wife, and told her she was a widow.

“Just coffee if it’s not too much trouble,” he said and forced himself to look into her eyes. She smiled at him and left for the kitchen, trailing a cloud of rose fragrance in her wake.

James leaned back heavily in the rocker and dropped one hand from the arm of the chair to the Bible that rested on his lap. He had not yet remembered to open it. He had marked several passages that his father, a minister as well, had suggested as being particularly comforting to the bereaved, but the bookmarks lay secure in their places, forming a colorful heap of yarn tassels on the knee of his black suitpants.

Bereaved was not the word he would use to describe Dorothy Sturgess.

He shook his head firmly, pushed his glasses up onto his forehead, and massaged his eyes with two fingers and a thumb.

It was a crazy notion he was

entertaining, one no doubt born of stress and fatigue. Her bizarre behavior, he decided, must be due to his own inept spiritual guidance, his lack of experience at counseling the griefstricken. He put the crazy notion away and set about redirecting his mind. His eyes fell on the enormous tapestry over the sofa that Mrs. Sturgess had just vacated.

The ladies of the church had made it several years ago, she had told him, and presented it to her as the outgoing president of the Women's Society. James had to wonder at the choice of subject—Abraham clutching a knife with both hands, ready to plunge it into his son Isaac's breast. The late afternoon sun, slanting in past a tangle of potted plants at the living room window, was now highlighting the tip of the knifeblade on which some over-eager church seamstress had woven several red accents to represent drops of blood.

Or more likely, he argued to himself, the red threads depicted rust spots on a knife that was otherwise gleaming in the presence of God's glory. And the sunlight was highlighting not just the tip of the knife, but everything else on the east wall that was approximately five and a half feet up from the floor. His imagination was simply running wild lately.

Mrs. Sturgess reappeared car-

rying a silver tray with two china cups and saucers, a tiny white pitcher, and a silver bowl of sugar cubes with a pair of silver tongs resting on top of them. She set the tray on the ornate coffee table between them and sat back down on the sofa, pinching up a bit of the skirt she was wearing and tugging it toward her calves.

"I'm afraid I've gotten a few hard looks this morning," she said, lifting one of the cups and handing it to James. "I know this seems a little casual—" she swept a hand down her front to indicate her bulky red sweater, denim skirt, bright red knee socks, and Birkenstock sandals—"but I really can't think of any reason to wear black, can you?" She lifted the sugarbowl and held it out to him. "Sugar?"

"Uh, no, thank you. This is fine."

"Can you, Reverend?"

"It's just—" James felt a bead of sweat, cold as icewater, roll slowly down his right side. He broke away from her feral gaze and looked down at his coffee. "It's just tradition, I suppose."

"Cream?" she asked, holding the tiny pitcher up.

"No, thank you," he said and pressed one hand under his coat to stop the progress of the tickling drop. "I take it black."

"I don't take it," Mrs. Sturgess said and pinned him with a

malicious smile, a facial challenge to disagree.

He nodded and smiled, a gesture so phony he was sure the angels in heaven must be heaving, and took a sip of the coffee. It was absolutely vile, tasted leftover and reheated from yesterday's dinner, and needed mountains of sugar and rivers of cream to be simply potable. He set the cup back in its saucer and onto the silver tray and then remembered to open his Bible.

"Now, about the Scripture you'd like for the service." He turned to the green bookmark in the New Testament and cleared his throat. "Most people find this verse very comforting. It's from—" In his mind-tangling nervousness, he was unable to decipher the title of the chapter and finally read the entire heading. "It's from the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians . . . uh, First Thessalonians," he amended and, feeling like an idiot, began to read:

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will—"

"That'll do," Mrs. Sturgess said curtly. "Whatever. You know," she added, her face suddenly softening with affection, "you've got a lovely voice, the voice of a minister. I bet you've

been told that before, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have," he admitted and wondered where, exactly, he was going wrong. The newly bereaved, he knew from academic and firsthand experience, were usually numb; having not yet internalized the loss, they required skilled guidance through the innumerable details of death. This James was prepared for. He was not prepared for the deceased to be regarded as an annoyance. He fumbled with the blue yarn bookmark, flipping back to the Old Testament. "This is from Isaiah," he said quickly. "Chapter twenty-five, verse eight. 'He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces.'" He exhaled, relieved at getting it all out.

"Sure," Mrs. Sturgess allowed, waving a dismissive hand in the air. "Read that one, too, if you feel like it. You've hardly touched your coffee, Reverend." She lifted the cup and saucer towards him, and he took it, cringing at the brush of her fingertips under the saucer.

He took one dismal sip and put the cup back down, wondering what sort of minister recoiled from the touch of a parishioner.

From the touch of a murderer, his mind squealed, and as he had done so many times in the

past, he started vigorously riffling through the Good Book, searching for help.

"You can put that away," Mrs. Sturgess said. "I trust you'll put on a good show for Randall." She dropped four cubes of sugar into her coffee. "I just can't stand it so hot it burns my lips, can you? I don't know how people drink it right from the pot like they do. I mean, it's not like it's your first, is it?"

The leap in subject matter forced him to look into her face. "My first?"

"You know, funeral," she said, and after testing the temperature of the coffee with her upper lip, she took a delicate sip. "You've been with us since the end of June, and I know there's been a death in the congregation since then. What about Jacob Peters? I know you conducted his funeral. It must have been you because Linda Wilson, that's my neighbor from down Grayson Road, you know that house that's turned funny and doesn't face either Grayson or Old Mill, anyway, Linda went to that funeral and couldn't stop talking about what a lovely voice the minister had. So deep and melodious. Read the Scripture like poetry, she said."

As if I were an oratory exhibition, James thought with a complete lack of charity and then blushed at his own crankiness.

The "crimson glow," a phenomenon he had been fighting to control since first taking the pulpit, did not escape Mrs. Sturgess.

"It's so nice to get someone so young," she said, "and so vital for a change. I bet you've just graduated from seminary, haven't you? Seems like I remember hearing that about you when you first came." She swirled the sugar sludge in her coffee and leaned back on the couch, a brown and gray overstuffed monster that appeared to be swallowing her, rump first. All the furniture in the room, she had informed him, had been picked to complement the tapestry behind her, it meant that much to her. It was an inspiration to her, she said, and he could believe it, although in what manner . . .

"Haven't you?" she asked again, and he looked from Abraham's tortured face to her placid one.

"Excuse me?"

"Just graduated from Duke." She stirred, stopped the swirl and reversed it, and then lifted spoonfuls of coffee out to drip back down into the cup. "I really can't stand it too hot. I can't stand being burned by man or beast," she took a sip, eyes locked on him over the cup, "or liquid."

"Yes, Duke," he said quickly and bent down to exchange his

Bible for the red Methodist Hymnal that lay on the floor beside his chair. "This is my first assignment. But I guess you've figured that out." He began flipping through the hymnal, thankful to have a reason not to look at the woman.

He could no longer doubt that she'd done it.

He threw the pages of the hymnal to and fro in clumps, completely missing the selections he had dogeared late last night as suggestions for Randall Sturgess's funeral service. The family sometimes feels very strongly about the old familiar ones, he had heard his father say, and remembered that Dorothy Sturgess was supposed to be doing the planning. He left the hymnal open but idle on his lap.

"I've marked a few songs in here that mean a lot to me, but of course we'll use your favorites or," he hesitated, "maybe Randall's, if you know—"

"No hymns," she said as if he'd been suggesting a spitting contest or nude dancing in the sanctuary. She shook her head, sat forward and set her cup on the coffee table, crossed her legs, and tugged on the skirt again. "I can't see any point in a lot of maudlin caterwauling being done over him. I don't want any hymns. Just prayer and the Scriptures and whatever else you have to say."

For a moment he was too startled to react. Admittedly, he had heard some sluggish, even somnolent, renditions but nothing he would categorize as maudlin caterwauling. The woman was simply impossible. And, a tiny voice whispered, he was a dismal failure at counseling the bereaved.

Not bereaved, he whispered back, closing the hymnal and setting it down on top of his Bible. Not bereaved.

He gathered both books in his hands. "So you'd like me to handle the service—that'll be tomorrow at two—using the verses I've mentioned and maybe a couple more that are appropriate" (he didn't even bother to say comforting) "and prayer but no hymns."

"That's right," she said and stood up, concluding the session. "Just use your own judgment. You knew Randall, I know you and he used to talk at the prayer breakfasts sometimes. No matter what you say, he's going straight to hell." She held out her hand for him to grasp and smiled.

"Mrs. Sturgess, I can't—"

She pushed her hand farther in his direction. "I'll see you tomorrow, Reverend Fulton."

"But if—"

"No buts and no ifs. It was God's will, and we both know it. See you at lunch tomorrow,

James." She stiffened her outstretched hand.

He shook it briefly, resisted the urge to rub the moist hand-shake off on his trouser leg, and looked over toward the front door.

"I guess I'll be going, then," he said and tried to remember what he was supposed to have achieved with this visit, although whatever it was, he had certainly failed. "If you need anything else, or if you want to speak to me about anything else, just let me know. Call me at the parsonage anytime, day or night."

"It won't be necessary," Dorothy promised, rubbing her own palms down the sides of her skirt. He had his hand on the doorknob when she raised one arm and pointed violently in his direction. "You wait right there, you hear? I'll be back in a minute."

He nodded and pressed on his phony smile, and Mrs. Sturgess left the room. He heard a murmur of female voices in the kitchen accompanied by hurried footsteps and clanking utensils and knew his fate was to be carry-out food. A resounding rip of aluminum foil found him studying the tapestry again, but this time he was looking at Isaac—a trusting soul, bound and laid on an altar of wood and about to

die. A lamb to the slaughter, saved at the last moment.

Randall Sturgess had not risen from his self-appointed altar.

Dorothy reentered the living room holding a pie in the air on one upturned palm like a roadside waitress. Bringing it down, she handed it to James.

"I know you said you had plenty of food," she gushed, "but I bet you being a single man you never get a taste of homemade cheesecake, now do you?"

"No, I don't," James admitted and wondered how he was going to juggle a Bible, a hymnal, and a cheesecake and still make his escape from the Sturgess living room. He secured a book under each armpit, took the pie plate in both hands, and felt like a klutz. After finally balancing the pie plate on the fingertips of one hand, he groped for the doorknob.

"Thank you, Mrs. Sturgess. I've never had—" he looked for the knob, gripped it and pulled the door open, then nudged the screen door open with the toe of his shoe—"I don't think I've ever had your key lime cheesecake." At last, at last, they were on the front porch. He gulped in the fresh October air, rich with moist earth and decaying leaves. She followed him out, stood at the top of the porch

steps, and watched as he quickly descended them.

"Be sure to put it in the refrigerator," she said and uncrossed her arms long enough to wave him goodbye. "You know it won't keep except in the refrigerator."

"Yes, I will," James called back from the end of the walkway. He nodded, although she had already turned and gone back through the screen door.

On the drive home, James's thoughts were a confused jumble of Biblical verses and imaginary detective scenarios, interspersed with snippets of his conversation with Mrs. Sturgess. He turned onto Highway 19, rode several miles toward the Avery County sheriff's department, realized he had nothing to say, and turned back toward the parsonage.

He paused for only a moment behind the sanctity of his own walls to put his Bible in the sacred spot beside his bed. Then he walked over to the closet, reached up to the overhead shelf, and took down one of the suitcases he had so recently unpacked.

Going to his tiny kitchen, he took a garbage bag from under the sink, slid the key lime cheesecake into it, and wrapped the excess plastic sheeting around and around the parcel. He considered digging out the masking tape and wrapping

cheesecake and bag mummy-style, but he didn't want to keep his hands on it that long. One strip of Scotch tape securing the open ends of the bag would have to do. Then it was into the suitcase, which he locked, tucking the key into his pants pocket, and back up onto the top closet shelf.

It was the most secure place he could think of.

**I**t had been James Fulton's habit since the summer he turned fifteen, when he had lost his only brother, to spend the hour from ten to eleven at night in prayer. It had helped then, as a buffer against the long night ahead, to send a message into the great glittering stretch of universe beyond his bedroom window, hoping that Charles, in his new proximity to God, would be privy to it. Even though the passage of years had eased his grief, he kept the same appointment every night, through high school (which made dating a challenge), through college, and at last, where he was considered neither a zealot nor a fruitcake, through his three years of seminary.

Now, with his own church, the ritual was easier still. He simply walked over from the parsonage and spent his hour in the sanctuary. Most nights he lit the al-



tar candles for two reasons, one practical, to see if he was alone, and one spiritual, as a symbol of the light of Christ. Tonight his thinking was neither practical nor spiritual, his soul in such disarray that he forgot the candles entirely and sat in the back pew of the sanctuary in total darkness.

It was well past eleven when the aroma of Tom Gilley's baking broke into his troubled reverie and drew him downstairs. Gilley, who had been sexton at Carver's Ridge United Methodist for nearly thirty years, had for the last twenty of them felt free to avail himself of the church's facilities, mainly the well-appointed kitchen in the basement. His own place, a two room log cabin on the far side of the cemetery, was equipped with only a toaster oven, a hot plate, an electric kettle for making hot drinks, and a crockpot for making soups and stews—hardly an adequate setup for a man who loved to bake.

James's nose told him, if his brain had forgotten, that it was Monday night—the night Tom did his community baking for the week. The sharp, sweet smell of sourdough bread grew stronger with each step down, and just as comforting was the sight of the loaves themselves, lined up and cooling on wire racks on the countertop that

separated the kitchen from the serving line.

Tom was finished for the evening; the only light still burning in the kitchen was the oven light, a soft square glow on one side of the room. He always left the oven door wide open after using it, hoping that some of the heat would find its way into the fellowship hall beyond, where he spent the rest of the evening.

Tonight the used heat barely reached beyond the bread-covered countertop. Walking down the unlit hallway between the kitchen and the fellowship hall, James felt the temperature drop sharply, and the fellowship hall itself was colder still—a vast subterranean darkness encased by cinder block walls and concrete flooring, a space from which you had to look up through the frosted windowpanes to see the cemetery. Only the fire on Tom's hearth, crackling in one corner of the great darkness, provided any spot of comfort. James patted the right pocket of his hunter green L.L. Bean field coat and then made his way across the room.

Halfway across, he called a greeting to the man lounging in a rocking chair in front of the fire. He had no desire to be the cause of a heart attack, although not much seemed to arouse violent emotion in Tom

Gilley. The sexton didn't turn but leaned forward in his rocker, pulled a metal chair out of the darkness with the toe of his shoe, and positioned it in front of the fire. James dropped into it, stretched his legs out toward the fire, and sank his hands into his coat pockets.

Tom looked at him briefly and nodded. "Haven't seen that before," he said and looked back into the stone fireplace. A prolonged hiss issued from the flames, ending when the logs shifted with a tiny shower of sparks.

"Pardon?" James asked and then understood. "You mean the coat." He shook his head. "Care package from home. Or rather, from Maine. My mother's confusing the Blue Ridge Mountains with the Himalayas. Like they can afford it," he said and pulled the vice out of his pocket. He cut the cigar in half and handed one of the stubs to Tom.

It was one of the few vices he indulged in and made no effort to subdue. He and Charles, on the last night of Charles's life, had hidden in the aluminum toolshed behind his father's parsonage and smoked a cigar together, passing it back and forth between them in the manner of more nefarious addictions. It was one of his last physical links to his brother, and he had to ad-

mit he had grown to enjoy the ritual now and then.

Tom took the stub and then rummaged in the kindling box. He held a stick to the flames and then to his cigar and drew on it to get a good light. James lit his half off of Tom's, and the two men settled in for what would normally have been an hour or so of desultory talk. Tonight would be different.

James hardly knew how to approach the subject that was tearing at him. Finally, after three draws on the cigar followed by no particularly enlightening thoughts, he said what everybody else at Carver's Ridge had said in the last twenty-four hours.

"Too bad about Randall Sturges, isn't it?" It sounded terribly trite, but he had at least opened up the subject.

"She killed him," Tom Gilley said flatly without taking his eyes away from the fire.

James had intended to toss around the subject of the Sturges marriage, indicate restrained amazement at Dorothy's recent behavior, probe delicately for smoldering church gossip.

He had wanted to light a match; Tom had touched off a bonfire.

That was it, then. James had grown to trust the old man completely over the last three

months on matters ranging from the best substance for patching rotten wood to the spiritual efficacy of speaking in tongues. Even though he looked like he should be stretching the rope of a medieval gallows, Tom worked hard and spoke little, and these two facts, in James's eyes, gave him an air of authority that surpassed that of his more well-heeled but ineffective parishioners.

The old man was in typical form tonight; dressed like Frankenstein's apprentice in an oversized suitcoat and a pair of gray workpants rolled up and secured with bobby pins, he rocked slowly back and forth, nursing his cigar stub and apparently feeling no urge to elaborate on his statement.

James ran over in his mind a short list of possible responses to Tom's announcement, such as "What makes you say that, Tom?" or "Now, let's not jump to conclusions," but in view of his late afternoon interview with Dorothy Sturgess, these were inanities. He turned in his chair and looked briefly around the fellowship hall and back toward the kitchen. No new lights told of another parishioner about, no distant footsteps collecting a forgotten purse or saying a midnight prayer. He turned around again and took a deep pull on the cigar.

"I know she did it," he said finally and bent forward toward the fire, resting his elbows on his knees. "When I went to her house this afternoon, she was not exactly what you'd call cut up with grief. I know people react differently to bereavement, maybe suppress the depth of their grief when others are around. But this was congealed rage, Tom. She hardly mentioned Randall at all, and when she did, it was to say he was going to hell. Instead, she went on about that gosh-awful tapestry hanging over her couch and the glorious experience of hearing my voice. And how she hates to be burned."

This was rich indeed. He was passing time gossiping about a parishioner. He tapped some cigar ash off and wondered if he would ever be the minister his father was, a man who could juggle church accounts and egos with equal dexterity, a man who would not sit beneath his own sanctuary and trash one of his flock.

And yet Randall Sturgess was, or had been, one of his flock as well. He remembered the man's face, twisted in pain for different reasons both Saturday and Sunday, and then remembered his wife, smiling and babbling about desserts and memorable funeral orations.

There was a thing called truth to consider. And justice.

"She did it, all right," he repeated. "What I don't know is how. Randall was fine when he spoke to me before worship."

"What'd the hospital claim he died of?"

"Heart. It runs in his family, apparently."

"Bosh," Tom said. "That according to her?"

James thought back to the confused jumble of impressions he'd taken away from the emergency room. One of them was Dorothy calmly ticking off on her fingers the names and ages of Tom's fallen relatives.

"It was her, all right," he said.

"Autopsy?"

"No. She didn't want one, and the doctor didn't push for it, said the heart rhythm was irregular and only got worse until they lost him. And since Randall'd had heart trouble before—"

"According to her?"

"Yes. I guess she could have lied about that, but how could she get away with it?"

"Easy as sin. They've got no children. Randall's and her families are from down on the coast. They'll come up for a few days, see Randall off, and then go home. Who's going to argue with her or even know she said it?"

"That's true," James said absently. "But what about the medical people? What about all

the tests they did, the EKG and all that?"

"Oh, I don't doubt it was heart. But they were trying to work from the inside out. I'm thinking it was from the outside in."

"You mean poison," James said. "She gave him something that caused the same kind of symptoms, and they missed it."

"That's what I'm thinking. How to prove it before Randall's covered over is another story."

"Cyanide in the sugarbowl," James said, remembering Dorothy's silver bowl of cubes. "Cyanide in his coffee. Cyanide in his cheesecake."

"Cyanide and he wouldn't have lasted through the first hymn, much less to read the Scripture lesson a quarter hour later. And you say you saw him right before preaching and he looked all right then?"

James nodded. "Looked fine to me."

Tom shook his head. "There's no sense to it. The man got up and read in front of the whole church without missing a beat. I was watching him, and he looked fit as a fiddle. And he was stone cold dead, with that woman's help, a couple of hours later."

Something in Tom's comments jiggled a wire. James thought about it for a moment.

"You say you were watching

him, Tom. You mean, watching him as in studying him as opposed to watching him to hear the Scripture lesson?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Studying him. As to why, I've got my reasons." He jammed the cigar in his mouth as if to stop an unwanted flow of words. James threw his on the fire. He didn't want Charlie's ritual tainted by this decidedly lurid turn of events.

For five minutes there was no sound save the popping and spitting of the flames. Tom got up to fuss a black poker among the dwindling logs and then stayed up, looking up at the nearly opaque window over their heads. On the other side of that window, tomorrow at two in the afternoon, Randall Sturgess would be lowered into the ground accompanied by promises from the Scriptures and prayers, but not by voices raised in song.

"Funny thing," James said to Tom's back. "Dorothy Sturgess didn't want even a single hymn at the service tomorrow. I know it's her choice," he added quickly, not wanting to appear judgmental, "but it's odd to me. Most folks find comfort in the old hymns. But she was adamant about it."

Tom turned, looked at James, then after one final pull threw his own cigar on the fire. He ran

three fingers into the hair at the back of his head, thick and gray and suffering from a home-made haircut, and then sat back down in the rocker.

"That's a shame," he said, his eyes brighter with interest. "And a curiosity. Real curious for her to do that. Randall loved the old ones. I told you how I watched him during the service. Even from the back row you could see the joy he got out of that hymnal. I reckon you could hear him loud and clear in the pulpit with him sitting right behind you there, where the lay readers sit."

"I could. He always sang harmony. Flawlessly."

"Yep," Tom continued. "I did a whole lot of watching yesterday, not just Randall either. I was watching you, too." He stopped, let that sink in, then kept going. "And you were doing a little watching yourself. More than random crowd-looking, I think. You were watching somebody on the left side of the sanctuary."

James nodded. "Yes."

"Looking awfully hard, too. Looked like you were conducting the whole service for that one soul."

Was it that obvious? James nodded again, felt his resolution and with it his credibility as a pastoral counselor going down the drain.

"You mind if I ask who you were studying?" Tom persisted.

James blinked, reached up, and needlessly adjusted his glasses. His father had told him he would run into this kind of problem—the necessity of choosing between two evils—but he'd never expected to face it so soon. He looked into the fire, imagining himself in some sort of press with the screws tightening. Tom was still waiting for an answer.

"It was Dorothy Sturgess," James said quietly and hung his head. "Randall wanted to talk to me Saturday morning after the prayer breakfast. He told me, in strict confidence which I'm now breaking, that something had been eating at him for weeks, and he needed help. He was, had been anyway, having an affair with Geneva Whitley. A short affair, he said, just since they both started going regularly to prayer meeting. Just a couple of months. He said he didn't know what had gotten into him, into either of them. They cut it off about two weeks ago, he said, they hoped before anybody was the wiser."

"They're wrong about that," Tom said. Reaching down beside his chair, he brought up a ceramic jug. "I don't know where my manners have gotten to. Care for cider? I brought you a cup in from the kitchen."

"Hard or regular?"

"Both at once," Tom said.

James had no idea what that meant, would have preferred hard, in fact hundred proof, and said he wouldn't mind a cup. Tom balanced two white plastic cups on the arm of the rocker, filled them to the coffeestain line, and handed one to James.

"It's not my way to speak ill of the dead," the older man said. He leaned back in his rocking chair, his cup held in front of him. "I don't believe in it. But there comes a time, like what you just told me that I could see plain and simple you didn't want to tell, when the truth has got to be in the driver's seat. I saw Randall Sturgess and Geneva Whitley coming out of this church many a night, just the two of them and way later than anybody else. You know I've got a clear view of the side door from my place. I keep a watch over the church." He stopped, swirling his cider. "And . . . I don't like confessing to such things, but after I once saw them leaving late together, I'd set up every Wednesday night after prayer meeting and watch for them. And they came out late every meeting save one. Holding hands, sometimes." Tom shook his head. "Damn foolish. Forgive my swearing."

"Anyway, and I've got to tell you I'm not proud of this either, one night I waited until they got

in their cars and left the church parking lot. And then I got in my truck and followed them. And they went right where I thought. That long motel on the highway coming into town. She parked in front, he parked behind. Wicked," Tom finished and took a draft of cider. "I reckon Randall's conscience was acting up on him."

"It was," James said, taking a swallow himself and closing his eyes against the burn. "He was ashamed of himself. He wanted to know what I thought, would it be better to tell Dorothy or let the whole thing lie."

"That poor fellow was a fool," Tom said. "Not that I didn't like Randall Sturgess and like him a lot. Together he and I made the best Brunswick stew in this county. Come November it would have been our third year straight. I reckon it won't be the same without him. But if he thought Dorothy didn't know, much less everybody in the church, much less everybody in Carver's Ridge, he was a fool."

James smiled weakly. "I didn't know."

"I guess you wouldn't, would you?" Tom asked and patted him on the shoulder. "You're just a greenhorn. So what'd you tell him?"

"I told him he was right to cut it off; he would be forgiven, and

he could start over again. Jesus said go and sin no more."

"Jesus did," Tom said and finished the cider in his cup in one gulp. "Dorothy Sturgess had a different way of looking at it. More cider?"

James held out his cup, and Tom refilled it. "So what did you tell him to do? About telling Dorothy?"

"I told him it wasn't for me to decide about that. That he would have to make that call. But," James shook his head briefly and sighed, "I told him that honesty was very important in a marriage. If it was eating at him now, it might only get worse with the passing of time. But it had to be his decision." James took a gulp of cider himself, started to wipe his mouth on his sleeve and then remembered the new Bean coat. The back of his hand served as a substitute. "Randall came to me Sunday morning right before worship and acted like a different man. He thanked me and said his burden was lifted. I assumed that meant he'd told her. That's why I was watching Dorothy, to see how she was acting. How she took it. Very professional, wasn't it?"

"Just human nature."

"I guess it's partly my fault that he's dead. I guess if I'd told him to wait and bring—"

"Don't torture yourself,



James," Tom said. "What you told Randall was sound. It's what I would have told him if he'd bothered to ask me. You can't blame yourself for other folks' sins. Besides . . ." Tom held the jug over his own cup and shook out a tiny trickle of cider. "You can bet your beans that Dorothy had known about the thing for a long time. Probably since the first night Randall came home late."

"Take mine," James passed his cup over to Tom. He was beginning to feel a slight buzz, and leaving the church at midnight in a drunken weave would not be desirable. It would doubtless be public knowledge before sunrise.

Tom took the cup, poured half of the golden liquid into his own, and then returned it to James. "I'll see you to the parsonage, if that's what you're worried about. We've got a task still ahead of us tonight. On second thought," he gestured for James's cup and set it on the floor in front of them, "I need you to have a clear head for at least another half hour. We both know she did it. Now we've got to figure out how and when so we can get the law in on it. Reckon you can hold your eyes open for a while longer?"

James nodded, painfully aware that they'd probably be open all night.

"I want you to think back," Tom continued. "Think about that meal yesterday. Did you sit anywhere near Randall?"

"No. Like I said, he spoke to me outside the sanctuary before worship, but I didn't see him much after the service until I took him to the hospital. I got just a glimpse or two of him in the serving line. We were going down both sides of the table, and he was on the opposite side, down some. I did notice he'd put barely anything on his plate. It surprised me because he'd acted so . . . liberated when he spoke to me earlier. I thought they must have worked things out."

"Was she with him in the line?"

"Yes. I didn't want to look at her face to face. I felt like an accomplice or something."

"In front of or behind him?"

James had to think for a moment. "In front."

Tom swirled his cider thoughtfully. "She wouldn't have slipped him anything in the line then, unless he turned his head and nobody else on either side was looking. Not too likely."

James shook his head no, not likely at all.

"And his plate was scanty. That's not like Randall. Must have been feeling poorly already. Before he even got down the serving line."

James nodded, feeling like a

rear window toy dog, his head being directed not by the motion of the car, but by Tom Gilley's remarks. The cider had already produced the effect Tom was trying to avoid.

"So if he was all right before the service," Tom carried on, "and already sickish before lunch, it must have been something between those times. During preaching."

"While I was preaching," James said and took his glasses off to rub his eyes into functioning. The fire, an orange blur, looked like the glow in some demonic furnace. The phrase "cool in the furnace" ran, or rather slogged, through his brain. With the slow dying of the fire, the room had indeed grown cooler. The Bean coat, which he had scoffed at earlier, was beginning to promise practicality instead of indulgence.

He put his glasses back on. "Well, I wouldn't know about that. You said you were looking at him during the service. Did he take a pill or anything?"

Tom, who had been moving slowly back and forth in the rocker, brought it to an abrupt halt halfway back. He held himself there for a few seconds and then brought the chair level. "I reckon I just might know what happened up there," he said and stood up. "I even saw it, saw the thing happen right before my

eyes. I reckon we all did. Come on, we're going up to the church."

James stood up—slowly because he knew he'd better. Tom had already disappeared.

"Pills?" James called after him as he followed.

"No." The answer came out of the dark from the stairs to the sanctuary.

James expected the lights to flash on by the time he got to the landing, but there was no sudden path of illumination from above. Tom, who had grabbed up his flashlight before he'd hurried up the steps, had left the young pastor in the dark, gripping the hand rail for guidance and kicking each riser to feel his way.

When he at last reached the top and passed through the narthex and into the sanctuary, he was sure he'd find Tom on his hands and knees behind the pulpit, scavenging for evidence. Instead, he stood immobile down at the front, his flashlight trained on something behind the altar railing. Something or someone. Since James had instigated the practice of leaving the church unlocked night and day, a few drifters had come in. Only one of them had caused any mischief, although that man had been armed with a butcher knife. James backed slowly down the aisle and stood

in the darkness of the narthex, trying to visualize a weapon. At last he groped for and found the empty collection plates on the narthex table. Taking one in both hands, he slipped back into the sanctuary. Clinging to the wall, he stepped to the right side aisle and crept, hunchback-style, toward the front. Halfway down he saw that Tom's flashlight beam was resting on the freestanding metal cross on the altar table. He laid the collection plate in a pew and straightened up, feeling slightly ridiculous.

"Always catches your eye, doesn't it?" he asked after he had waited at the other man's elbow for a moment.

"It does," Tom answered. "And it also catches my eye that those are Sunday morning flowers and this is Monday night. Whose turn was it to take them around to the shut-ins?"

"Randall's. Billy White took them last week. Dorothy said to leave them for Randall's service. She wants to lay them on his grave as a kind of memorial to his service to others. I suppose there'll be a lot more tomorrow. Randall was well liked."

"That he was." Tom moved his flashlight first to one side of the pulpit and then to the other. The circle of light picked up the oaken pulpit hung with the green cloth of Trinity, the baptismal font to the right, and, for

the lay readers, two massive wooden chairs with red velvet upholstery. Both were behind the pulpit, one on the minister's left and one on his right. Between the chairs was a small pine table with an aluminum water pitcher and three plastic glasses stacked upside down on top of each other. Tom's light, after dancing around the chancel for a moment, came to rest on the water pitcher.

"Did you drink from that on Sunday morning?" he asked James with some urgency.

"Probably," James said, tucking his hands, which were getting stiff with cold, under his armpits. "I usually keep a cup half full and set it on that shelf under the pulpit where I keep the Bible and my notes."

"Did you do it that way yesterday?"

"I'm pretty sure I did."

"And was anything different back there on that table? Were the cups stacked atop each other like they usually are?"

"Nothing different that I can remember. I always fill them to half and set them out for us sometime before the worship service. I put mine on the first shelf in the pulpit and leave the other two on the table. One on each side of it."

"And you poured water in all three before the service? You did it yourself?"

"Yes."

"Were they empty when you did that?"

"As far as I could tell."

"Hmmm . . ." Tom mused, running his fingers into his hair and leaving them there for a moment, his thinking gesture. "When did you say you filled them?"

"Normally I do it between Sunday school and worship. Yesterday I did it early, as soon as I unlocked my study and got the heat going. There was a note under my study door saying somebody wanted a quick word with me in the study after Sunday school, so I knew I wouldn't have time then. I sort of assumed it would be Randall, but like I said, he spoke to me while we were waiting to enter the sanctuary. He never came to the study."

"Uh-huh," Tom said. "I bet that note wasn't signed, and I bet nobody else came up to your study, either. That was from her, to keep you up there and away from those glasses."

James, fighting the dawning awareness that he had been duped into helping commit a murder, in front of his entire congregation no less, could not speak at once.

"She's a sly one," Tom continued. "I'll have to hand her that. She tied you up but figured you wouldn't forget that water. That

gave her plenty of time to poison what you'd already poured. She had the whole Sunday school hour to do it and everybody else, including you and me, was busy with Sunday school."

James took a few steps backward and lowered himself into the first pew. He had jotted down a few notes concerning Randall's funeral service, nothing more. Tomorrow at two he would be required to stand up before a murderess and, with her victim stretched out between them, say words designed to ease her grief. The sheer absurdity of it made his head throb.

"It's not your fault, son," Tom said quietly.

"I know," James said after a moment. "Just tell me this. How could she know for sure that Randall was going to drink out of that cup? How could she know he was going to take a drink at all?"

"She couldn't, I reckon, for sure. She just figured that at some point during the service his throat would dry up on him."

"I could have grabbed that cup. Or Billy."

Tom shook his head. "You said you always keep yours under the pulpit. There'd be no reason for Billy to reach across a close cup for one that was far-

ther away. Nope. She was gunning for Randall and Randall alone. She knew what she was doing."

James stood up. "So what do we do? He's being buried at two o'clock." He turned his watch face into the flashlight glow. "Two o'clock today."

"We think on it overnight," Tom said and trained his flashlight back on the cross. "We pray on it." He held the light still for another moment, and then James thought he heard the beginnings of a prayer.

"Lord Jesus, have mercy," the old man whispered, and James bowed his head. When no other supplications followed, he said a quick prayer of his own and then looked up to see if Tom was ready to leave the sanctuary.

The sexton's face bore no resemblance to that of a suppliant. His lips were shut tight, his jawline rigid with anger. He shook his head and spoke without turning toward James.

"Oleander," he said and jumped the flashlight beam toward the spray of flowers behind the cross. His voice was peevish, resentful. "She's stuck oleander stems in the Sunday morning flowers. Probably snuck over here Saturday night after Randall confessed and stuck them in so they'd set all night, poisoning the water. Then just tipped that vase into Randall's glass after

drinking the water you poured or pouring it back into the pitcher."

"But why would she leave the oleander for everybody to see?"

"Pshaw," Tom said. "She figured nobody around here would be the wiser. That stuff doesn't grow up here in the mountains. She likely figured, and she's likely right, that nobody would recognize it for what it is. I wager she's got a pot of it setting right in her house somewhere. Probably took a cutting off some bush down on the coast and brought it up here with her."

"So we call the police?" James asked.

"Not just yet." Tom moved the flashlight beam back to Randall's death seat. "There's one more thing."

**R**andall Sturgess's funeral, an event that packed the church and even required folding chairs to be brought up from the fellowship hall, was a disaster from start to finish. Considering the way the day began, however, this was no great surprise.

A gusty rain, starting sometime before dawn, blew the protective tarp off the rotten spot in the church roof and drenched the first three pews on the right side. James, who had come into the sanctuary for an hour or so of meditation before taking

lunch with the Sturgess family, instead spent the time pushing a mop and collecting soggy bath towels in a black garbage bag.

He did this with his back to the chancel. After initially studying the oleander, at Tom's request, he wanted to destroy the arrangement completely, to end the desecration of the altar. He knew, and Tom reminded him emphatically, that such an action would be foolish—would be the destruction of evidence in a murder case. So he could do nothing but keep his back to Dorothy's weapon and refuse to acknowledge it.

Later, eating ham biscuits and potato salad in the Sturgess home, James had slipped into the living room while Dorothy was busy with back-door hostess duties and checked on the potted plants at her front window. He recognized at once, in the sea of greenery, the individual plant that had donated the poisonous stems to the church arrangement. After a quick glance to ensure that Dorothy's voice was still animated and high-pitched in cordiality, he leaned into the flora, broke off a piece of the oleander, and slipped it into his pocket. Just in case it disappeared later on.

On one level, annoyingly near the surface and strident, his conscience revolted at this betrayal of a trusting parishioner.

A deeper level of his psyche reminded him that it was common sense to bring a murderer to justice.

No level, however, offered enlightenment about how to address his bungling of Randall's funeral. Not wanting to appear hopelessly homespun, he had replaced his tasseled bookmarks with tiny and unexpectedly buoyant slips of paper and consequently spent an embarrassing number of minutes simply flipping pages in his Bible, searching for the verses he had planned to read. Midway through the first prayer, he reached for his half-filled water glass and knocked it over, sending a stream of water running down his right pants leg and onto his shoes. Relinquishing the pulpit to Jason Emory, who wanted to speak a few words in memory of his friend, James had sat in the lay reader's chair with water dripping from his trouser cuff to the worn red carpet and tried to banish the red from his cheeks. And through it all, dry-eyed and cosy with a smile playing about her lips, Dorothy Sturgess sat, not only returning to the scene of the crime, but bringing a full house with her.

It was enough to distract John Wesley himself.

By the time it was finally over, with Randall prayed over,

spoken over, and buried and the mourners dispersed, James was tired to the bone and wanted nothing more to do with the whole affair. When he opened the door to his study, a small slip of paper on the floor was the last thing he wanted to see.

If it was from Dorothy Sturgess, he promised himself a new career. Instead, the note was from Tom. The words were brief but provocative:

*Meet me in the sanctuary as soon after dark as you know the church is empty. No lights. I figure we'll be seeing Dorothy again before the evening's out.*

Assuming the older man knew what was what and would explain it to him later, James fell into his desk chair to wait for the coming of dark.

**W**hen it finally came, a slow cigar and two hours of solitude later, he was nearly restored. Hoping he would never again find a slip of paper on his study floor, he pulled the door quietly shut and listened for any sound that might mean the presence of another human being in Carver's Ridge United Methodist. Hearing nothing but the wood creaking under his own feet and summer's last locusts, he quietly

made his way to the sanctuary.

As always on entering the immense room, James was mindful of the presence of God; the vast, empty space, silent yet expectant, was suffused with it. He was also immediately aware of a human figure sitting in the back pew, head bowed as though in prayer. He hoped it was Tom; he had no desire to exchange fakeries with Dorothy Sturgess. He was relieved to hear the old man's voice as he got to the back of the church.

Tom spoke without preamble. "Lie down on one of these back pews here. Stretch out full length so she won't see you no matter if she comes in front or back. I'll lie down on this one here; you take the next one up. Hurry up. And keep still until I make a move myself. I figure we'll hear her come in pretty soon, but it could be later. I reckon you could do with the rest anyway."

James agreed with that sentiment wholeheartedly, was, even restored, too weary to ask questions, and so stretched out on the pew in front of Tom and folded his hands over his chest like the man he'd seen off to eternity earlier in the day. After a good while, when it seemed his skull could not tolerate the hard wood for another minute, he heard the front door of the sanctuary open and close. Caught in the



act of turning over, he froze. For several moments there was not a breath of sound. Then the figure, evidently satisfied that it was alone, passed down the center aisle toward the altar. A faint whiff of roses confirmed that it was Dorothy Sturgess.

James lay perfectly still on the pew, afraid that even a slight movement would cause the wood under him to creak. Behind him it seemed that Tom had even stopped breathing.

Dorothy's footsteps, muffled by the carpet, gave nothing away. He had no idea where she was until he heard the gate to the chancel railing screech open. She was prowling around the lay readers' chairs, the pulpit, and the altar table where the cross of Christ and her oleander stems had shared unholy juxtaposition. In another moment there was a tiny metallic click and the sanctuary was bathed in candlelight.

She was looking for something, although what James could not begin to guess. The floral arrangement was now resting on the freshly turned earth of Randall's grave and, if Tom was right, was no threat to her anyway. James tried to imagine what else among the sparse chancel furnishings could be involved in the death of Randall Sturgess. Then he was sure he knew—the glass Randall drank

from—and almost snapped his fingers in “aha” recognition, when he heard a dull thump on the chancel carpet. Seconds passed and he heard it again, the double thump of something dropped from a height that made it bounce. Then the railing gate creaked open, and Dorothy left the chancel area.

The sanctuary was silent for a moment, and then he heard her at work again, this time producing a different sound effect, still a thump but sharper and quicker and coming from the right-hand pews. After the sound was repeated several more times, he had no doubt whatsoever what the woman was doing. Why still eluded him. He was about to disregard Tom's request and confront her out of curiosity when he heard the pew behind him come to life in a symphony of creaking. Tom was sitting up.

Dorothy gasped, and the hymn book in her hands slipped away from her, banging into the pew and landing with a thud on the carpet. Tom put his hand on the back of the pew James was on and stood.

“You can quit looking straight-away, Dorothy,” he said. “I’ve got it right here.” He brought a book up in his right hand and shook it in the manner of a fire and brimstone preacher waving a Bible. In the dim glow of the candles

James could see the red of the Methodist Hymnal.

Slowly Dorothy bent at the knees and disappeared between the pews. She stayed down for several moments, then rose and slid the fallen hymnal back into its wooden slot beside the Bible.

"What is it, Tom?" she asked, brushing her hands together as if they had become soiled. To James's dismay, she turned to face them and at once became unreadable. The candlelight behind her revealed nothing but the outline of her head, shoulders, and jutting elbows. Only her voice was distinct. "Is that a hymnal you've got there?"

"You know good and well it is, woman," Tom answered. "You're too late. You figured we were too stupid to catch onto your murdering tricks, but I reckon you were wrong." He rapped his knuckles on the hymnal. "Right here's the proof of it, that I'm holding onto this hymnal instead of you."

Dorothy's shoulders rose and fell in the semidarkness. "I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

James, feeling thick as molasses and twice as slow, was equally clueless. His training suggested he should intervene, direct the confrontation into positive channels, suggest a moral conclusion to the whole affair. His instinct told him to

say nothing; he was not an actor in this particular drama. He took a breath and looked from Dorothy to Tom.

The old man noticed his glance. "Here, Reverend Fulton," he said and held the hymnal out to James without taking his eyes from Dorothy Sturgess. "I want you to take this hymnal and smell it and tell me what you smell."

"Smell it?" James asked, not sure of his own ears.

"Yessir. Smell it."

James lifted the pages to his nose and sniffed. The odor was unmistakable.

"Vicks VapoRub," he said immediately.

"That's right," Tom said and held his hand out to take the book back. "And if you care to open that hymnal and find where that smell is coming from exactly, I believe you'll find it in close proximity to our closing hymn from last Sunday's worship service. Isn't that right, Dorothy?"

"How would I know?" the feminine voice came, not perplexed any more but defiant. "I don't know the condition of every hymn book in this church."

"No, ma'am, you don't. But you do know the condition of this one. You were looking for this hymnal right here, the only one in this church that smells of camphor and eucalyptus."

"I was looking for a bookmark that Louise Brown gave me, one with the Lord's Prayer on it. I left it in the hymnal during Randall's service."

"You were looking around the lay readers' chairs, Dorothy," James said. "How could it have gotten up there since two o'clock?"

"Reverend Fulton," Dorothy said, and her elbows jutted out slightly farther. "I believe you've been spending too much time with that old fool behind you. Does that hymnal really look like a murder weapon to you?"

James turned to look at the hymnal as if to decide on its suitability as a murder weapon. He prayed that Tom would intervene with some answer.

"Oh, this is no murder weapon," the older man obliged him. "No, ma'am. This is more like . . . well . . . like bait, I reckon. See, Dorothy, what you don't know is that I was watching Randall pretty close on Sunday morning. I knew what he'd been doing and I could tell it was paining him, but on Sunday morning it seemed like the pain had dropped away. He seemed like a happy man, something he hasn't been in months. It struck me as curious, so I was watching him off and on during preaching, and I was watching him when we came to the closing

hymn and Reverend Fulton here said can we all turn to page two seventy-six and join together. I guess most folks were flipping right along with Randall, so they didn't notice. But I always check that hymn-board over yonder that James fixes up on Saturday afternoon, and then I mark my hymns and Scripture lesson first off so I can turn right to them later on. So I was watching when Randall got into this stuff." He tapped the edges of the hymnal with his fingers.

"The VapoRub?" James asked, feeling a light come on, however faint.

"That's right," Tom said. "Randall had a habit, like a lot of folks do, of licking his fingertips to turn the pages easier. When he came to the pages near to two seventy-six, he started struggling with them. I figured at first it was just some uncut pages or a wad of gum. But then I saw his face."

"James," Dorothy started, but Tom talked over her.

"Randall's face twisted up something awful, but just for a second because he was sitting up there in front of everybody. So to get that awful taste out of his mouth, the one that came from the pages of this hymnal that you doctored up, he grabbed for that glass of water on the table beside him. Only

you'd doctored that up as well. And that was the end of Randall."

"That's ridiculous," Dorothy scoffed. "James filled those glasses himself."

"And you tipped that flower water into Randall's and filled his a little bit more. Figured no mountain folks would recognize those stems in the arrangement. What you didn't figure on is my daddy doing some wildcrafting and me learning some things from him—like oleander and what a deadly poison it is. All parts of it, even the water it sets in."

Dorothy was silent, and James imagined that her arms were moving again, that she was fingering the butt of a pistol in the pocket of her coat. They would find his Bible in his study, read the very same verses over him that he'd just spoken over Randall . . .

"And what you also didn't figure on," Tom wasn't through yet, "was the young people collecting all these hymnals after worship and bringing them down to the chicken pie dinner for a hymn sing there. And by doing that, throwing a big wrench in your plans to come back up here and snatch Randall's doctored hymnal out from under his seat where he left it. When they returned the hymnals, it was willy-nilly, leaving

you with no clue as to exactly where this one was."

"That's why she didn't want any hymns at the funeral service," James mused aloud. "She didn't want anybody to get suspicious. To wonder how that Vicks got there."

"That's right, James. She's smeared the five pages before and five pages after number two seventy-six to a fare-thee-well. I reckon you'll have to cut the corners off them."

Dorothy turned without another word and walked out the side door of the sanctuary.

Tom pointed after her with the hymnal. "I'd lay money she's going to get those oleanders off Randall's grave. You get that sample from her house?"

"Yes," James said, patting his pocket. "What I want to know is what made you all of a sudden remember Randall struggling with those pages. And how you knew she'd be coming in here tonight to look for that hymnal."

"You made me do both of those," Tom said. Coming out from behind his pew, he dropped one hand on James's shoulder as they walked down the side aisle toward the back stairs. "When I saw you flipping through your Bible today at Randall's service, having trouble finding the pages you wanted, it reminded me of seeing Randall do it on Sunday

morning. And that reminded me of that face he made and him taking that drink of water right after he'd licked his fingertips. It just made horse sense that that was how she poisoned him."

"But how'd you know she'd come tonight?" James persisted.

"Simple. She told you no hymns at Randall's funeral service. That part she could control. What she couldn't control is prayer meeting tomorrow night, with singing. She had to get that hymnal before somebody else did and started wondering why

all those pages were smeared with ointment."

"She almost got away with it," James said and shuddered to think that he had stood a yard away from Randall, singing, while the man drank the poison that killed him. "What do we do now?" he asked, trusting that Tom would know.

"We go downstairs, we light up that fire, and we warm ourselves a little and drink a little cider. Plain this time, not hard. We'll be talking to the sheriff a little later, and we want our heads on straight when we do it."

## SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

The fugitive bank robber was a member of the crew of the *Seadog*, which would reach its destination 2.75 days after its departure. It was on that ship that Captain Kaplan and Sergeant Largent discovered the stolen money, watches, and rings.

| SHIPPER    | PRODUCT   | SHIP          | CAPTAIN |
|------------|-----------|---------------|---------|
| Andy Ickes | grain     | <i>Ram</i>    | O'Hara  |
| Bob Gavin  | fish      | <i>Tiger</i>  | LaMer   |
| Cal Jacoby | ore       | <i>Parrot</i> | Nero    |
| Dan Fuller | coal      | <i>Seadog</i> | Mack    |
| Ed Hagar   | machinery | <i>Queen</i>  | Kelly   |

| SHIPPER    | DISTANCE | SPEED | TIME |
|------------|----------|-------|------|
| Andy Ickes | 1000     | 350   | 2.86 |
| Bob Gavin  | 800      | 275   | 2.91 |
| Cal Jacoby | 1200     | 425   | 2.82 |
| Dan Fuller | 1100     | 400   | 2.75 |
| Ed Hagar   | 900      | 300   | 3.00 |

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE HOUSE

## André Maurois

Translated by Adrienne Foulke



“**T**wo years ago,” she said, “when I was so sick, I realized that I was dreaming the same dream night after night. I was walking in the country. In the distance I could see a white house, low and long, that was surrounded by a grove of linden trees. To the left of the house a meadow bordered by poplars pleasantly interrupted the symmetry of the scene, and the tips of the poplars, which you could see from far off, were swaying above the linden.

“In my dream I was drawn to this house, and I walked toward it. A white wooden gate closed the entrance. I opened it and walked along a gracefully curving path. The path was lined by trees, and under the trees I found spring flowers—primroses and periwinkles and anemones that faded the moment I picked them. As I came to the end of this path, I was only a few steps from the house. In front of the house there was a great green expanse, clipped like the English lawns. It was bare except for a single bed of violet flowers encircling it.

“The house was built of white stone, and it had a slate roof. The door—a light-oak door with carved panels—was at the top of a flight of steps. I wanted to visit the house, but no one answered when I called. I was terribly disappointed, and I rang and I shouted—and finally I woke up.

“That was my dream, and for months it kept coming back with such precision and fidelity that finally I thought surely I must have seen this park and this house as a child. When I would wake up, however, I could never recapture it in waking memory. The search for it became such an obsession that one summer—I’d learned to drive a little car—I decided to spend my vacation driving through France in search of my dream house.

“I’m not going to tell you about my travels. I explored Normandy, Touraine, Poitou, and found nothing, which didn’t surprise me. In October I came back to Paris, and all through the winter I continued to dream about the white house. Last spring I resumed my old habit of making excursions in the outskirts of Paris. One day I was crossing a valley near l’Isle-Adam. Suddenly I felt an agreeable shock—that strange feeling one has when after a long absence one recognizes people or places one has loved.

“Although I had never been in that particular area before, I was perfectly familiar with the landscape lying to my right. The crests

*From The Collected Stories of André Maurois, translated by Adrienne Foulke. © 1967 by Washington Square Press, Inc. Reprinted with permission from the author's representative Scott Meredith Literary Agency, LP.*



of some poplars dominated a stand of linden trees. Through the foliage, which was still sparse, I could glimpse a house. Then I knew that I had found my dream château. I was quite aware that a hundred yards ahead a narrow road would be cutting across the highway. The road was there. I followed it. It led me to a white gate.

"There began the path I had so often followed. Under the trees I admired the carpet of soft colors woven by the periwinkles, the primroses, and the anemones. When I came to the end of the row of linden, I saw the green lawn and the little flight of steps, at the top of which was the light-oak door. I got out of my car, ran quickly up the steps, and rang the bell.

"I was terribly afraid that no one would answer, but almost immediately a servant appeared. It was a man with a sad face, very old. He was wearing a black jacket. He seemed very much surprised to see me, and he looked at me closely without saying a word.

"I'm going to ask you a rather odd favor,' I said. 'I don't know the owners of this house, but I would be very happy if they would permit me to visit it.'

"The château is for rent, madame,' he said, with what struck me as regret, 'and I am here to show it.'

"To rent?" I said. 'What luck! It's too much to have hoped for. But how is it that the owners of such a beautiful house aren't living in it?'

"The owners did live in it, madame. They moved out when it became haunted.'

"Haunted?" I said. 'That will scarcely stop me. I didn't know people in France, even in the country, still believed in ghosts.'

"I wouldn't believe in them, madame,' he said seriously, 'if I myself had not met, in the park at night, the phantom that drove my employers away.'

"What a story!" I said, trying to smile.

"A story, madame,' the old man said with an air of reproach, 'that you least of all should laugh at, since the phantom was you.'"

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

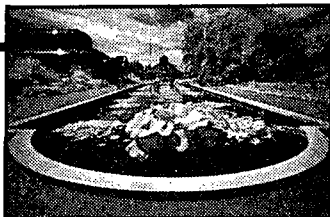


**P**ete Hautman's first two comic thrillers featuring Joe Crow were published to mighty praise. Now there's **The Mortal Nuts** (Simon & Schuster, \$21), which will undoubtedly garner more attention. Crow's wily dad, Sam O'Gara, and his old buddy Axel Speeter take center stage in this maniacal, madcap novel which Hautman describes as "a tortured tale of passion, greed, mini-donuts, murder, pickup trucks and cheese curds." Its characters are larger than life and yet immediately recognizable. There's seventy-three-year-old Axel, who makes a good living from his Minnesota State Fair burrito stand. There's his younger lover Sophie, who's determined to prove herself worthy of the title "manager" this summer. And there's Sophie's flaky but well-endowed daughter, whose attraction to a skinhead named James Dean proves to be the first ominous note in a cacophonous crescendo that builds like the 1812 Overture—and ends in fireworks, too. Hautman has a rare gift for exaggeration, comic contrast, and manic pacing. The effect is as hilarious and scary and exhilarating as the biggest roller coaster ride you can find.

**Archangel** by Mike Conner (Tor, \$6.99) has lots to recommend it to mystery fans, though it veers sharply from a narrow genre path. The time is the early 1930's. The place is called Milltown, Minnesota, but it's obviously Minneapolis, and the author has gone to great lengths to research this upper Midwestern city between the wars. But Conner's vision is of a world ravaged by a devastating plague, one for which there is no cure and little treatment. Only black people are naturally immune; in its ten years the disease has already emptied major cities and bankrupted entire nations. Con-

(continued on page 158)

# THE STORY THAT WON



The June Mysterious was won by Francis C. New York. Honorable beth Jennings of Henolima; John Heiden of nia; John F. Besnard of Ensign of Holland,

Hendrickson of Anderson, Missouri; Janice B. Weishaar of Webster, New York; Jacqueline E. Clemens of Redlands, California; Dennis L. Dunn of Fostoria, Ohio; and William D. Long of Rolling Hills Estates, California.

Photograph contest Biddy of Rochester, mentions go to Elizabethsonville, North CarSan Jacinto, California; Jodi Irvine, California; Jodi Michigan; Carolyn

## BRAIN FOOD by Francis C. Biddy

The quarrelsome couple, sixty-something, unfolded their cheap beach chairs, glaring at each other so fiercely that passersby stepped widely around them.

"Just once," she complained, "I'd like to sit by the rose garden."

"Tough!" he snapped. "Lilies're my favorites."

"I never should have married you."

"You got *that* right," he growled, poking her shoulder too hard.

They bickered by the lily pond nearly every afternoon during June. Occasionally a campus cop told them to keep the noise down. But the grounds were open to the public, and no one ever asked them to leave.

Then one day in July the woman arrived alone. She smiled serenely as she gazed at the lilies and the endlessly circling carp. Curious, a cop asked her about the man.

"Got himself a hobby," she said. "That fancy gardening—y'know, where there's no dirt, just water and nutrients. Hydroponics, they call it."

When the grounds crew drained the pond for cleaning in the autumn, they found the man tied to his beach chair under the lushest lily. The roots reached deeply through the empty eye sockets and violated the gaping mouth. The carp had fed on him. The campus cops waited for the woman to arrive. Surprised by the draining of the pond, she tried to scuttle away from the macabre scene, but they stopped her.

"Why'd you kill him?" the sergeant asked.

"I didn't," she cackled. "Y'see, he's not really dead, 'cause he's still active, hydroponically." Her laugh was scary enough to wilt lilies.

(continued from page 156)

ner's hero is a reporter, a loner and young widower, who happens to be on the scene when a mysterious blonde woman murders and mutilates a man. Like Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*, *Archangel* is a fascinating look at a period, albeit through a glass darkly.

Ellen Hart continues her Jane Lawless series with **Robber's Wine** (Seal Press, \$21.95). Like earlier novels in this award-winning series, this is the story of a memorable family, one with a past that may hide a secret worth killing to protect. Restaurant owner Jane and her flamboyant sidekick Cordelia are headed for Lake Superior's north shore for a few days of R&R. Along the way they plan a brief stop at a small lake community to drop off their friend Anne at her mother's house. But they arrive to find a fearful situation: Anne's mother has apparently disappeared into thin air. Before the "vacation from hell" is over, Jane must do what she does best: listen, observe, and draw some satisfyingly surprising conclusions.

Sarah Shankman has created a bright and irresistible country and western wannabe in Shelby Kay Tate, heroine of **I Still Miss My Man but My Aim Is Getting Better** (Pocket, \$21). Better yet, Shelby is just one of a string of characters who jump off the page and into readers' hearts, including a benevolent spiritual guardian named "Patsy Angel." There's lots of action, a couple of dangerous characters, and loads of snappy dialogue that turn this tale into one of high adventure and topnotch entertainment. It should climb the charts fast.

M. D. Lake's eighth Peggy O'Neill mystery is **Flirting with Death** (Avon, \$5.99), and its plot packs a punch. Peggy is a smart and streetwise campus cop at a major university. She isn't easily disconcerted, and yet two casual encounters with a strange young man loitering outside the U's prestigious veterinary hospital leave her uncomfortable and feeling unaccountably harassed. When a female hospital employee is attacked and dies on the front steps, Peggy's new "friend" Jason is the prime suspect. When Jason begins stalking Peggy, reason tells her that the police are targeting the correct killer. Her instincts, however, disagree, and she begins to nose around. Peggy's point of view—that of a stalker's target who's been trained to fight crime and has difficulty even imagining herself as a victim—is refreshing and rings true. Peggy is still snapping out those one-liners with the best of them, but in this case they're sprinkled throughout a chilling story with a shocker of a finale. Run, don't walk, to pick this up.

# CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

AH Nov '96

HITCHCOCK/QUEEN combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is \$4.80 per word—payable in advance (\$72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020.

## ADDITIONAL INCOME

\$1000 weekly processing mail. Free details, send SASE: Dept. A, PO Box 2822, Fullerton, CA 92633-2833.

## BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265-0133.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free catalog! New and Recycled Detective Fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, 513-242-7527.

FREE catalogs. Collectible and used mystery fiction. Murder Is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429, 513-438-0211.

FREE catalog of used and collectible detective fiction. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, Maine 04609.

MANUSCRIPTS WANTED, ALL TYPES. Publisher with 75-year tradition. "Author's Guide to Subsidy Publishing." 1-800-695-9599.

## BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

ARE YOU READY FOR THE FUTURE? Don't be left behind! Don't pay big phone bills. Pay yourself; it's easy! Ask me how. Dorothea, 1-800-218-9956.

## EDUCATION AND INSTRUCTION

WITCHCRAFT Occult Miracle Power Secrets. Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, New Bern, NC 28563.

## FOOD

GOURMET SPICES and SEASONINGS. Make good food taste great! FREE CATALOG. Black Hills Marketing, P.O. Box 11147, Olympia, WA 98508-1147.

## MANUSCRIPTS TYPED

Affordable accuracy word processing, 787 No. Colony Road, Unit 1-10, Meriden, CT 06450, (203) 237-0456, \$1.25 pp + post.

## MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE

9th annual MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, March 8, 1997. Seven day Western Caribbean cruise aboard Princess Cruises' magnificent new Sun Princess. Call Cruise-Works, 800-876-6664.

## MYSTERY

FREE mystery fiction catalogs, lists and bargain catalogs. Aardvarks Booksellers, PO Box 585066, Orlando, FL 32858-5066.

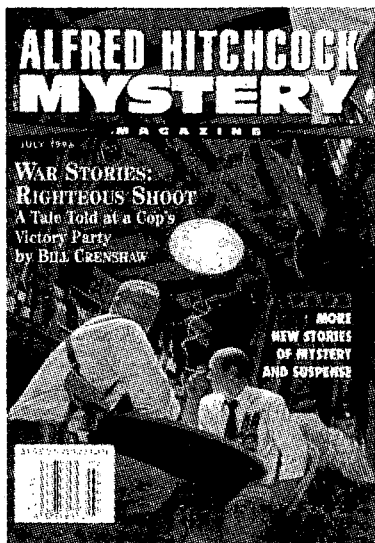
## PERSONAL

Nationwide introductions! Refined singles 18-80. Also Japanese, Asian, European! Identify, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance and marriage with Americans! All ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE (Dept. AHEQ), Romance House, 20 Albion Street, Broadstairs, Kent CT10 1LU, England. Tel: 01144-1843-863322 (24 Hrs).



# SOME PEOPLE WOULD KILL... FOR A COPY.



But you don't need to! Subscribe to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine and you won't miss a single issue of all the mystery and intrigue you love. Each year you'll enjoy 10 issues of 160 pages and one double issue of more than 280 pages delivered directly to your door.

*Plus* when you subscribe for 2 years you'll save more than 25% off the regular price! Subscribe for 1 year and save more than 20%.



To order by charge card, call toll-free:

**1-800-333-3311**



**Alfred Hitchcock • P.O. Box 5124  
Harlan, IA 51593**

**2 years (24 issues) for only \$49.97 or 1 year (12 issues) for \$25.97\***

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. **Outside USA:** Add \$5 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. This offer expires 6/30/97. \*We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# THE BUTLER DID IT?

STAY TUNED...  
SUBSCRIBE NOW  
AND FIND OUT WHODUNIT!

2 years (24 issues) for only 49.97 (you save more than 25%!)  
or 1 year (12 issues) for \$25.97 (you save more than 20%!)\*

CALL



NOW

1-800-333-3053

OR



MAIL TO

ELLERY QUEEN

P.O. Box 5127

Harlan, IA 51593

Allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside USA:  
Add \$5 per year for shipping & handling. All orders must be  
paid in U.S. funds. Offer expires 6/30/97. \*We publish a double  
issue in September/October which counts as two issues toward  
your subscription.

HA620

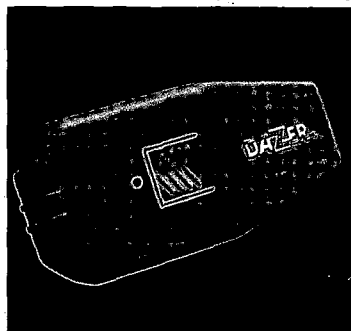
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



# Select Styles Emporium

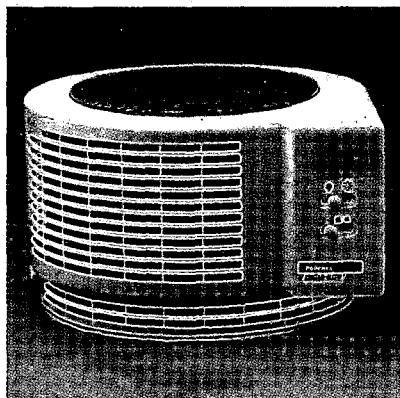
## The Ultrasonic Deterrent - The Dazer™

The Dazer is a hand held dog deterrent. Utilizing safe, humane, ultra sound technology the Dazer is a must for joggers, bicyclists, the postman and especially kids and seniors. The Dazer works by producing a discomforting, but not harmful, high frequency sound audible only to dogs. Unlike mace and other chemical deterrents there is no harm to the animal. Its compact, lightweight and features a belt clip for easy carrying. Shipped with a 9 volt battery. #2AH202



**\$34.<sup>98</sup>** (\$5.<sup>98</sup> S&H)

## Table Top IONIZER Air Freshener - with Three Filters



This revolutionary air cleaner uses four technologies to clean, deodorize and eliminate bacteria from the air. First, a High Density Carbon Prefilter traps odors and captures larger particles. Next the unique BioGerm™ filter eliminates germs, including staph and strep bacteria. Then a Hospital Grade HEPA Main Filter removes 99% of all airborne particles (0.3 microns or larger) while the 5-needle ionizer further reduces pollutants and freshens and revitalizes the

air. Filters the volume of air in a 12' x 16' room 3x per hour. 110 volts UL Listed #2AH909

**\$129.<sup>98</sup>** (\$11.<sup>98</sup> S&H)

**Call Toll Free:**

**1-800-580-9445**

NJ Residents Add 6% Sales Tax  
Canadian Orders Add \$6.00



To Order By Mail Send  
Check or Money Order To:

Point to Point

PO Box 2007

Brick, NJ 08723